

Women in Coleridge's "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "The Eolian Harp": Sexualisation and the Cultural Expectations

Muammer Özoltulular

Bülent Ecevit University, Turkey

Abstract:

To face it, it is quite challenging to draw distinctive borders of women issues when it comes to Romantic poets of English literature. These poets were reforming many issues of the contemporary culture of England such as valuing the nature, which was deteriorated by Industrial Revolution of the period, and emphasizing intuition over reason. However, the changes those poets endeavouring to create might not be considered as revolutionary since these poets could not manage to stay away from the traditions of their societies. The aim of this paper is to analyse the place of women in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, The Eolian Harp and Christabel": how he sexualised women and what were the cultural expectation from women at the time. Allocating an exaggerated feminine aspect to women nearly climaxes in one of Coleridge's memorable poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Coleridge attends sexualising women in "Christabel" with the help of specific word choice. Additionally, it might be put forward that Coleridge gives significance to virginity, which is identified with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Christianity when Coleridge's being 'a staunch Anglican in religion' is taken into consideration. In most of the patriarchal societies, virginity equates purity, which is utilized by men to suppress women. Moreover, negative attitudes of Coleridge towards his wife, Sara Fricker, must be concentrated on to have an insight into the poet's views on women. Considering the attitudes of Coleridge towards his wife, the assertions above on sexualisation of women and cultural expectations from them in the eyes of Coleridge might be conceived as accurate.

Keywords: Sexualisation, Women, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Cultural Expectations

1. Introduction

To face it, it is quite challenging to draw distinctive borders of women issues when it comes to Romantic poets of English literature. These poets were reforming many issues of the contemporary culture of England such as appreciating nature, which was deteriorated by Industrial Revolution of the period, and emphasizing intuition over reason. However, the changes those poets endeavouring to create might not be considered as revolutionary since they could not manage to separate themselves from the traditional norms of their societies. Therefore, the poetry of Romantic period poets is commonly criticised by many scholars nowadays.

It may be argued that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the limited reformist poets of the period, prisons female characters in his poems to the norms of the society of his time even

though it is known that he is impressed by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, who is considered one of the founding feminist philosophers. H. J. Jackson (1993) states that he fears that the inhabitants of the twentieth century most probably will not like Coleridge when they are informed about Coleridge's views on women in "Coleridge's Women, or Girls, Girls, Girls are Made to Love" (p. 577). The aim of this paper is to analyse the place of women in "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "The Eolian Harp": how he sexualised women and what were the cultural expectations from women during his time.

2. Analysis of Coleridge's Poems on the Basis of Cultural Expectation from Women during 19th Century and the Sexualisation of Women

In the first place, it may be claimed that sexualising women is frequently encountered in Coleridge's poetry when the fact that the poet's descriptions of female characters are excessively feminine is taken into account. Allocating an exaggerated feminine aspect to women nearly climaxes in one of Coleridge's memorable poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.(190-4)

In the excerpt, Coleridge identifies the spirit beast haunting the ship as a curse due to unfair killing of the Albatross. His identification of the spirit beast as feminine may be asserted to conform to female image in his time, which is capable of drawing the attention of the reader with feminist concerns. The spirit beast's red lips and free looks may be regarded sexual representatives of an attractive woman for men considering the norms of beauty in patriarchal societies. In addition, the phrase 'Life-in-Death was she' in the excerpt reveals the attitude of the poet towards women, who is attractive, desirable and provocative. According to Coleridge, to approach towards such a woman might be sinful and dangerous as her beauty and sexual attractiveness have the power of freezing the blood of men, who looks at him.

Coleridge sexualises women not only in his poem mentioned above but also in "Christabel" poem of his. The excerpt below is taken from the first part of the poem "Christabel", where the reader meets with Christabel and Geraldine, two main characters of the poem:

There she seems a damsel bright,
Drest 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;
Her blue-veined feet unsandal'd were,
And widely glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, 'twas frightful there to see,

A lady so richly clad as she-
Beautiful exceedingly! (58-68)

Coleridge, in the first line of this verse, applies to the word 'damsel' instead of a word usage such as 'a young woman', most probably because he considered this usage as required for implying the significance of being virgin. Besides, the colour of the robe chosen for the young woman may convey a specific meaning of virginity as colour white signifies purity and the state of being untouched. It might be put forward that Coleridge gives significance to virginity, which is identified with the Blessed Virgin Mary in Christianity when Coleridge's being 'a staunch Anglican in religion' (Stillinger, Lynch. 2012 p. 437) is taken into consideration.

In the second line, Coleridge continues to attribute a different feminine beauty to the 'damsel' clothing her in silk. Silk as a fabric has a function of directly reminding the reader of sexuality. In the third and fourth lines, Coleridge focuses on this young woman's white neck and bare arms. Moreover, the poet with bare feet image creates a so-called requirement for women to stay inside their houses. Bare feet image finds ground with the phrase 'barefoot and pregnant', which was put forward in the early twentieth century, meaning that women should not work outside their houses and should have many children during their productive years.

In the same poem, the readers proceed to encounter with sensational depiction of women according to the sets of patriarchal system in terms of beauty. A simile is benefited from to sexualise women in the second line of the excerpt taken from "Christabel": "Red as a rose is she (34)". The purpose of Coleridge's preference of red colour for a rose while depicting a woman might be considered concrete as sexualising women in the eyes of men.

The subject of virginity is also encountered in "The Elion Harp". The excessive pride allocated for virginity in the poet's time is reflected in his poem. In the line "Like some coy maid yielding to her lover (16)", Coleridge reveals that he regards virginity significant and draws a parallel between purity and virginity with his word usage. His choice of the word 'maid' may be claimed to be connected with his view of women, which is humiliating since women are evaluated based on phallogentric value, virginity. Additionally, it might be claimed that he creates an image of submissive women, whereby he claims that virginity is advantageous for a woman. The maid's defining as 'coy' supports the idea that submission is told to be positive characteristics of a woman by the poet.

The speaker of the poem "The Elion Harp" expresses his gratitude to God in the stanza below:

I praise him, and with Faith inly feels,
Who with his saving mercies healéd me,
A sinful and most miserable man,
Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess,
Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honoured Maid.(61-5)

As can be seen from the last line of the stanza above, Coleridge regards women as a private property such as a place to live, granted by God to him. Besides, the poet utilizes the word

'maid' one more time in the poem, which is capable of helping the readers to comprehend the importance of virginity for the poet.

In the second place, Coleridge displays cultural expectations from women such as being mild, obedient, withdrawn, and passive in his poems. When the poetry of Coleridge is examined, the reader may easily come to the conclusion that the poet himself claims that a perfect woman is a submissive one. For instance, the poet likens the desultory breeze to /some coy maid half yielding to her lover/ in his poem "The Eolian Harp". Another example of requirements of women according to the poet comes in the same poem identifying Mariana with the adjective of 'meek' in the line: Meek daughter in the family of Christ.

Similar connotations are abundant in Coleridge's poetry:

The lovely lady, Christabel,
Whom her father loves so well,
What makes her in the wood so late,
A furlong from the castle gate?
She had dreams all yesternight
Of her own betrothed knight;
And she in the midnight wood will pray
For the weal of her lover that's far away. (23-30)

The verse above is taken from "Christabel" and sheds light upon the vision of favourable women from the perspective of the poet. Christabel's being a lovely lady is paralleled with her father's love towards her in the first two lines. The reader seems to be asked to value Christabel as lovely only because her father loves her. In short, Christabel is a lovely lady since she corresponds to the requirements that have been allocated by men. A different indication of cultural expectations from women comes in the sixth line of the verse above. The joint usage of the words, which function for the same purpose; 'her' and 'own' respectively, points to the possession of men over women in the line. Finally, Christabel's pray for her fiancé might be considered as submissiveness of women as well.

3. Conclusion

Negative attitudes of Coleridge towards his wife, Sara Fricker, must be concentrated on to have an insight into the poet's views on women. He humiliates Sara whenever possible blaming her due to her sex, intellect, and her abilities, which might provide readers with an micro-understanding of Coleridge's perspective of women in general. Additionally, Coleridge dares to declare that women are inferior to men in some aspects: "Permit me, my dear Sara! Without offence to you, as Heaven knows! It is without any feeling of Pride in myself, to say – that in sex, acquirements, and in the quantity and quality of natural endowments whether of Feeling, or of Intellect, you are the Inferior." (Coleridge & Taylor. 1994. p. 163). This is a part from a letter that Coleridge writes to his wife, Sara, after they have a serious quarrel. In his letter, as can be seen; Coleridge has his own criteria for a good woman and finds those, who stay under the limit of his criteria, inferior. The poet utilizes the exaggerated power received from patriarchal system to humiliate women on the basis of sex

.after all.

Considering the attitudes of Coleridge towards his wife, the assertions above on sexualisation of women and the conformity of Coleridge's views on women to the cultural expectations of his period might be conceived as accurate. As is seen in the analysis of the poems of Coleridge in the body part of this paper, it may be argued that he sexualises women in his poems: "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "The Eolian Harp". It might be concluded that Coleridge conforms to the ideals and responsibilities assigned to women in patriarchal societies in his time and sexualises women, which can be understood with a focus on the word usage of him in his poetry.

References:

- Abrams, M. H., & Greenblatt, S. (2012). *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York: Norton.
- Coleridge, S. T., & Taylor, A. (1994). *Coleridge's Writings*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Griggs, E. L. (1956). *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. UK: Clarendon Press.
- Jackson, H. J. (1993). Coleridge's Women, or Girls, Girls, Girls are Made to Love. *Studies of Romanticism* 3, 577-600.