Romance in “Christabel”: Fear of the Supernatural Other

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ABSTRACT

Literary romance is a difficult term to coherently define among critics. Dating back to the thirteenth century in Middle English, the number of romances written in the preceding English centuries offers an expansive opportunity for scholarly research and debate. One commonality that may be examined is the presence of a hero/heroine and a supernatural entity meant to challenge the protagonist’s inability to live up to ideals. Spanning from 1785 to 1832, British Romanticism is a movement that critics also have trouble defining. Literature written during the Romantic period includes the first and second-generation poets, who were present during and after the French Revolution respectively. This research attempts to answer the question, what exactly does literary romance have to do with Romanticism? The selected Romantic-era poem of study is “Christabel” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge due to its presence of a heroine in Christabel and a supernatural entity in Geraldine. When placing literary romance’s Morgan le Fay and Geraldine in juxtaposition with one another, a clearer definition of romance and Romanticism may be formed. “Christabel” invokes literary romance’s tendency to depict a supernatural other who is not inherently evil but complicates through sexual temptation the hero’s struggle with chastity. The supernatural other is someone who is outcasted and alienated from society because they are a perceived threat to normalcy. However, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and “Christabel” demonstrate how the real threat is often the hero/heroine’s inability to deny temptation. This research ultimately reveals how the hero and supernatural other become vehicles to reflect common weaknesses and flaws that make people human.

Introduction

In England, literary romances written in Middle English date back to the thirteenth century. Sometimes considered a literary genre or mode, romance provokes “an awareness of historical tension between the past, usually idealized, and the corrupt present” (Poplawski 41). The number of romances written in the preceding centuries makes it difficult for critics to generalize about the mode. Even with this difficulty, some romance critics attempt to find the connections between romance stories to form a coherent definition. A commonality that may be considered is the presence of a heroic character. As Northrop Frye explains, "In every age, the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy” (186). Romances do feature heroes and heroines, but their attributes are often more complicated than what Frye presents. The "ideals" romance heroes are representative of, such as virtue and chivalry, tend to be flawed when applied to reality. Instead, heroes are challenged within the narrative to demonstrate their inability to live up to unrealistic ideals. The challenge often comes in the form of a supernatural entity (witches, demons, etc.) who tempts the hero away from their moral path.

Romanticism, on the other hand, was a movement spanning from 1785 to 1832 that acted in opposition to eighteenth-century neo-classism. Literature written during the Romantic period is also difficult for critics to define because of the era’s textual variety. A possible aspect of the Romantic period worth studying is the work of its first and second-generation poets. The writing of the first-generation poets appeared during the French Revolution, while

the second generation came afterward. Critics now look upon these British poets to gather common aesthetic qualities, such as individualism and the celebration of nature. Some modern critics even associate British poets of the Romantic period with the literary romance. For instance, Stuart Curran claims, “Romanticism was deeply influenced, and in a very real sense instigated, by one of the great scholarly achievements of the Enlightenment, the recovery of medieval literature as embodied in its romances” (129). In other words, medieval motifs commonly represented in romance can sometimes be found in Romantic-era poems. When adopting the motif of supernaturality, Romanticism addresses England’s contemporary issues with otherization. An example of a Romantic-era poem with anxiety towards the supernatural other is “Christabel” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poem features a young maiden named Christabel who rescues a female victim in the woods and brings her home for safety. Christabel does not know the woman she saved is non-human, and strange phenomena occur when she spends the night. Morgan le Fay is also a supernatural being, but she comes from the romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*. Her character is presented as an obstacle during Gawain and Lancelot’s adventures, where any sort of failure to defeat her reflects on the heroes’ inability to reject temptation. In juxtaposition to Morgan le Fay, “Christabel” invokes literary romance’s tendency to depict a supernatural other who is not inherently evil but complicates (through sexual temptation) the hero’s struggle with chastity.

The Hero and The Other

Literary romance often features a magical narrative that centers around a struggle between its heroic protagonist and an estranged "other." Some critics assume the supernatural other represents an evil that stands in opposition to the "goodness" of the hero. However, in his article "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre,” Frederic Jameson argues against Northrop Frye’s claim that the romance hero is mythically superior to other men. He explains how the centric issue in romance is not the “elevation of the hero” but the “very concept of the hero as a critical category” (139). Simply put, romance complicates the hero’s involvement in the opposition of good vs. evil. From Jameson's point of view, the romance hero is more like a vehicle represented by states of being rather than action. These states of being include common qualities and attributes, such as recklessness and inexperience, that give the hero a more passive role. Thus, the romance protagonist is not a one-dimensional saint but an observer that watches aimlessly as the supernatural events unfold around them.

All Jameson’s idea of the unaware and naïve literary romance hero can be seen as a parallel to Christabel because she allows an unknown supernatural entity into her home. After finding Geraldine harmed by five warriors in the woods, Christabel invites her to the Baron’s household for some rest:

> The lady sank, belike thro’ pain,
> And Christabel with might and main
> Lifted her up, a weary weight,
> Over the threshold of the gate:
> Then the lady rose again,
> And mov’d, as she were not in pain. (124-129)

At first, Geraldine acts like a suffering damsel from her attack. Christabel comes to her rescue by lifting her like a "weary weight." The phrase "over the threshold of the gate" indicates Geraldine needs an invitation (almost like a vampire) to enter the sanctified domain. Geraldine’s deceptive nature is shown for the first time when she rises again and "mov'd, as she were not in pain." How does she heal upon her entry through the "threshold?" Was her pain merely an act? The last two lines imply Geraldine's true identity is a mystery. Her species of supernatural creature (vampire, demon, etc.) is never directly revealed by Coleridge. Yet, the reader still gathers from the poem's context that she is not completely human. Christabel allowing Geraldine’s foreign invasion is what makes her like a literary romance

heroine. Her heroism results from inexperience and unawareness of the supernatural, not righteous behavior or moral superiority to the villain.

While some critics believe that the hero and villain oppose one another, Jameson examines a different kind of interpretation. As mentioned earlier, heroes of literary romance do not stand above other men (or supernatural beings) as morally superior. They have flaws like naivety that make them the appropriate protagonist. If this claim is correct, then what makes a literary romance villain "evil?" Jameson believes the hero and the villain cannot be taken at face value. Instead, he examines through an anthropological lens how good and evil are constructed by humans. For example, Jameson writes, "Evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me, whatever by precisely that difference seems to constitute a very real and urgent threat to my existence" (140). With his concept in mind, evil is anyone different enough to pose as a threat to the hero's status quo: a status quo that represents their own virtues and societal customs. Witches and vampires stand outside the regular social order. They are "radically different" than heroes because they do not live by the same mortal rules. Thus, the villain is not feared for their wickedness but for their supernatural otherness.

Supernatural Otherness

To illustrate this otherness, the literary romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has a supernatural antagonist named Morgan Le Fay. Even though Morgan Le Fay is barely present in the story, she does enchant the Green Knight to challenge the King's court and frighten Queen Guinevere to death. It is not a coincidence that Morgan Le Fay looks like a stereotypical old witch. She is covered in veils except for "the two eyes and the nose, the naked lips" which are "unsightly to see, and sorrily bleared" (Anonymous 962-963). A critic might say that Gawain exaggerates Morgan Le Fay's appearance based on his society's view of attractiveness, not on her wicked actions. As Sandra Elaine Capps's *Morgan le Fay as Other in English Medieval and Modern Texts* states, "The Other is outside the social order, beyond the known. Morgan as Other represents the transgressive: the tension between the Christian and pagan worlds, between the male and female position of Subject and Object, between the centered and the marginalized" (vi). Indeed, Morgan Le Fay is everything British medieval society was afraid of: a woman, a pagan, and a powerful sorceress all in one body. She is otherized by Gawain when he contrasts her with the beautiful Lady Bertilak, who looks and acts like a proper English woman should. For instance, Gawain describes the younger lady as "short and thick of waist, / Her buttocks round and wide; / more toothsome, to his taste" (Anonymous 966-968). In contrast to Morgan le Fay, Lady Bertilak's physical features, such as "thick of waist" and buttocks "round and wide," are depicted in a positive light because they fit the standards of English beauty. By exaggerating their physical differences, Gawain is otherizing Morgan le Fay simply because she does not look like the rest of his community. Therefore, Gawain's actions demonstrate how literary romance can feature a villain who is feared for being the supernatural other, not because they are inherently evil.

Similar to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "Christabel" also features a supernatural antagonist that cannot fully be categorized as evil. Even though Geraldine does not directly kill or physically harm anyone in the poem, she is heavily associated with demonic imagery. For example, when Geraldine undresses in Christabel's room, Coleridge describes the strangeness of her body:

> 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 shame, this seal of my sorrow. (255-258)

One of the things Geraldine does to Christabel that might be interpreted as evil is how she "worketh a spell" on her bosom. The spell "lord of thy utterance" renders Christabel unable to speak of Geraldine's true form. While her form remains ambiguous to the reader, there are specific lines that refer to the otherness of her body. Alluding to the mark

of Cain, the phrases “mark of shame” and “seal of my sorrow” separate and differentiate Geraldine’s appearance from that of Christabel. It is unclear whether or not Geraldine has these distinctly evil features or if Christabel is projecting her sexual fears and anxieties to otherize her. As Paul A. Cantor’s article “Inviting Evil In” explains, “We believe that good and evil are polar opposites, and therefore that, when evil enters the lives of good people, it does so wholly from outside, as a completely alien force” (50). Parallel to Jameson’s argument, Cantor also presents the idea that good and evil do not stand in opposition to each other. Instead, heroes see the villain as a kind of invader “wholly from the outside,” meaning they blame the presence of evil on an external body rather than questioning their own fears. By describing Geraldine’s body as an “alien force,” Christabel directs her fear outside herself and towards the supernatural other.

Assuming that Geraldine is a vampire, Christabel’s kind of otherization is not surprising. Vampires have stood as representations of European anxiety towards foreigners for decades. In Linda Heidenreich’s text “Vampires Among Us,” she claims, “At the close of the nineteenth century, British culture changed gender roles that coincided with fears of the foreign within its midst and of losing empire" (93). In other words, the exposing and killing of vampires within stories gave British men and women the confidence needed to defeat cultural threats and expand colonial victories. Vampiric bodies model physical differentiation, such as pale skin, red eyes, and fangs. Even though Geraldine does not have red eyes or fangs, her body is described in terms of strangeness and alienation. Geraldine’s supernatural and demonic features do not necessarily prove she is an evil character. For instance, Cantor argues, “The folk wisdom in vampire lore knows better. As innocent as good people may appear to be, if they were not somehow open to the influence of evil, they could not be possessed by it” (50). His argument raises an interesting point about how the influence of evil is usually present before the vampire enters the story. If the hero, like Christabel, invites the vampire inside their home, they need to be somewhat open to evil in the first place. This simultaneous fear and attraction toward the vampire are a parallel to the otherization and exoticization of foreigners. Therefore, Christabel’s alien view of Geraldine’s body may indicate she fears Geraldine for the same reason Gawain fears Morgan le Fay: for being the marginalized other, a pagan woman with power.

Chastity and Sexual Purity Under Threat

The aspects of the romance hero commonly challenged in literary romances are the virtues of chastity and sexual purity. As Emma Simpson in “Satire and The Virtue of Romance” explains, “While silence and obedience were often subordinate to chastity, early modern conduct manuals ask women to uphold these and other virtues simultaneously” (205). Resisting sexual desire and staying pure for marriage was significant in Britain's sixteenth century, especially for women. A good English woman upheld all virtues and never strayed from the path of chastity. Keeping one’s sexual innocence is a common theme in literary romances and can apply to male characters as well. In Thomas Malory's book *Le Morte Darthur*, a male knight named Galahad is described as a “clean virgin above all knights, as the flower of the lily in whom virginity is signified; thou art the rose which is the flower of all good virtue” (395). With flower symbolism and a metaphor of the virgin lily, King Mordrains explains how Galahad is spiritually “above all knights” because of his sexual cleanliness. Galahad’s character has an “intrinsic lack of sexual desire” that allows him reward for not committing acts of sin (Arkenberg 3). Although he has not performed as many earthly accomplishments as his father, his virgin blood is pure enough to ascend to heaven in the Holy Grail quest. A reader could interpret Galahad’s ascension as literary romance valuing chastity in its characters. Yet, Galahad’s lack of sexual desire also makes him a secondary character to his father. Most often, the romance protagonist has to struggle with temptation because the common person cannot relate to Galahad’s lack of desire.

In contrast to his son, Lancelot is unsuccessful in his quest because of his worldly desire for Queen Guinevere. Simpson explains how romance heroes and heroines are expected to uphold chastity, but often the story reveals “the difficulty of doing so” (205). Romance heroes are supposed to struggle with denying sexual desire and temptation. As an example of this struggle, Lancelot enters a chapel and exclaims, “My sin and wickedness have brought me a unto great dishonour. For when I sought worldly adventures for worldly desires, I ever achieved them and had the better in

every place" (331). During his Holy Grail quest, Lancelot acknowledges his weakness to resist "worldly desires" and that his failure to deny his sexual lust towards the queen is a kind of "dishonour." Before the hermit of the chapel, he recognizes his sexual transgression and begs forgiveness for giving into temptation. The hermit makes Lancelot promise that he shall "no more come in that queen's fellowship as much as ye may forbear" (333). Considering the story's preceding events, Lancelot's commitment to this promise is questionable. He is caught red-handed by the knights Mordred and Agravaine despite being warned not to enter Queen Guinevere's bedroom. Lancelot's inability to resist worldly temptation causes a wedge between him, King Arthur, and his fellow men. In fact, his internal conflict with sexual desire and adulterous love for the queen led to the downfall of the entire Round Table. Although his lust results in a tragic end, Lancelot's struggle between chastity and desire makes him relatable as a human being and the story's flawed romance hero.

The importance of chastity, and the hero's personal struggle to remain chaste, is also a present theme in "Christabel." From the start, the narrator describes the protagonist as "lovely lady, Christabel, / Whom her father loves so well" (23-24). The reader can assume based on her initial characteristics as a "lovely lady" that the narrator is praising her innocence. Yet, the next six lines appear to contradict the narrator's belief about Christabel's so-called innocence:

> She had dreams all yesternight
> Of her own betrothed knight;
> Dreams, that made her moan and leap,
> As on her bed she lay in sleep;
> And she in the midnight wood will pray
> For the weal of her lover that's far away. (27-32)

She had "dreams all yesternight" that stirred her enough to go to "the midnight wood" to pray those impure feelings away. Her startling dreams were of her "own betrothed knight," who is currently somewhere "far away" on one of his adventures. Coleridge cleverly writes the word "betrothed" to imply Christabel is technically still unmarried, but she has dreams of him that make her "moan and leap." An unmarried woman moaning in her sleep has a sexual subtext that is explored throughout the poem. For example, the morning after Geraldine spends the night in her bedroom, the narrator says, "Having pray'd / That He, who on the cross did groan, / Might wash away her sins unknown" (376-378). Christabel does the same action of praying to Jesus "who on the cross did groan" to wash away her sins as she did in the woods. Her prayers may represent a personal struggle with abstaining from lustful thoughts. As Andrew M. Cooper in his article "Gothic Parody and Original Sin" explains, "Geraldine, who is not evil incarnate, only provides the opportunity for sinning; Christabel is free to stand or fall" (89). In his point of view, Christabel is somewhat aware of her guilt from the start. She believes in a constructed myth about Geraldine (that she is evil incarnate) to cover up and restrict her own failure to remain sexually pure. The careful reader is aware of this myth because her lustful thoughts of the knight are present before Geraldine even arrives in the story. Therefore, Christabel's inner weakness to deny sexual desire makes her similar to the two romance heroes: Gawain and Lancelot.

A Sexual and Magical Seduction

Most often, the supernatural other in literary romance tempts the hero through a sexual or magical seduction; the seduction may be successful or unsuccessful in deterring the hero away from virtue. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan le Fay tries magically tempting both Gawain and Lancelot. She plays a more direct role in *Le Morte Darthur* when she decides to enchant Lancelot and force him to choose between the four queens. The queens strive for Lancelot's love because he is the noblest of knights, but they know he only has eyes for Queen Guinevere. So, Morgan le Fay hatches a plan and explains, "I shall put an enchantment upon him that he shall not awake of all these seven hours, and then I will lead him away unto my castle. And when he is surely within my hold, I shall take the enchantment from him" (98). Some critics believe that Morgan Le Fay's abduction of a sleeping

Lancelot is a metaphor for sexual assault. There are lines like "when he is surely within my hold" that may indicate her wickedness, but the other queens (who are not supernatural) assist her scheme as well. Once awake, Lancelot responds to the queens that he would rather die than have one of them "paramour maugre" his head because they are "false enchanters" (98). With his refusal to choose between them, his abduction may represent a failed seduction that is meant to show how Lancelot's character is loyal, even to the forbidden love of Queen Guinevere. *Le Morte Darthur* reveals how the romance hero can choose to deny sexual temptation from the supernatural other, so as long as their sexual desire points elsewhere.

In comparison to Lancelot, Morgan le Fay's seduction of Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is more indirect in nature. While hardly present in the poem, Morgan le Fay orchestrates almost everything behind the scenes. She is a member of the Bertilak's household and most likely knows of Lady Bertilak's attempt to seduce Gawain while her husband is away. When the lady tries sexually tempting Gawain, the narrator says she "tried many a time, / whatever her true intent, / to entice him to sin, / but so fair was his defense that no fault appeared" (Anonymous 1549-1551). Lady Bertilak attempts to "entice him to sin" three times throughout the poem. Gawain is successful at resisting her until the third time when he accepts her token of the green girdle. Unlike Lancelot, Gawain falls for the entrapment initiated by Morgan le Fay. The Green Knight tells him Morgan le Fay's spell changed his appearance and that "by subtleties of science and sorcerers' arts, / the mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man" (Anonymous 2447-2448). The last phrase "she has caught many a man" implies Morgan le Fay is the one who sexually seduces Gawain in the same way she has seduced her lover, Merlin. So, what appears to be a failed seduction, becomes a rather successful one. The main difference between Lancelot and Gawain's seduction is that Gawain is still capable of blame. He is similar to Christabel because there is a part of him that wants to be seduced. He even prays to the Lord "to cleanse his soul" in the same way that Christabel tries to pray away her lustful dreams of Geraldine the next morning (Anonymous 1883). If Cooper's earlier claim is applied here, then perhaps Gawain also believes in a constructed myth about the wickedness of Morgan le Fay to cover up his own failure. When a part of the victim wants to be seduced, can the supernatural other be blamed completely for the outcome? Doing so may very well risk passing all of the responsibility onto the supernatural other, making them a scapegoat only because they are alien to the hero.

Like Morgan le Fay in *Le Morte Darthur*, Geraldine's seduction of Christabel is direct and magically induced. Rather than orchestrating the plot behind the scenes, Geraldine is at the forefront of the story. While there is a kind of temptation going on, what makes Geraldine's seduction explicitly sexual? For one thing, Geraldine's body is emphasized not only through otherization but also sexualization. The morning after she spends the night in Christabel's room, Christabel notices how Geraldine's body is even more beautiful than before. She says Geraldine is "nay, fairer yet! / and yet more fair" and Christabel cannot believe she is the same woman from the woods (362). She continues describing Geraldine in even more erotic terms and mentions how "her girded vests / Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts" (367-368). In these lines, Geraldine almost becomes a succubus: a female demon that sexually seduces men and feeds on their energy to become even more beautiful the next day. As Gerald E. Enscoe's book *Eros and the Romantics: Sexual Love as Theme in Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* explains, "She [Geraldine] is the personification of erotic, sexual forces entering the castle to perform their ministry through the seduction of Christabel" (45). The personification of the erotic comes with the attention given to Geraldine's individual body parts, such as her face, skin, and chest. All of these alluring features make it possible to interpret Geraldine as a "sexual force" or a type of seducer invading the castle. However, upon further examination, the line between the seduce and the seducer blurs as the poem continues. For instance, the Bard's dream of the snake and the dove symbolizes the relationship between Geraldine and Christabel:

> Coil'd around its wings and neck.
> Green as the herbs on which it couch'd,
> Close by the dove's its head it crouch'd;
> And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
> Swelling its neck as she swell'd hers! (538-542).

Looking closely at this stanza, the word “coil’d” is not explicitly violent, but the line does imply the dove is entangled with the snake. The word “crouch’d” may come across as threatening, but the next line “with the dove it heaves and stirs” indicates the two animals are moving together. Therefore, the dove is not a victim and is very much alive as it “heaves and stirs” in a sexual movement with the snake. Perhaps referring to genitalia, the last line of the stanza mentions a swelling that is on both the animals’ necks. The timeline is established when taking notice of the word “swelling” in the present tense and “swell’d” in the past tense. If Geraldine represents the snake, whose tail is phallic in shape, then she was seduced by Christabel first. By blurring the relationship between the seduced and the seducer, "Christabel" leaves us with the same question as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*. Is the supernatural other inherently evil and responsible for the hero's downfall, or is there more to the story than meets the eye?

Conclusion

What can be gathered from Morgan le Fay and Geraldine’s juxtaposition is the complex depiction of the supernatural other in certain romances and Romantic-era poems. These various representations may be analyzed to form speculations about the nature of good vs. evil and the marginalization of the villain. As Jameson and other scholars point out, heroes cannot be labeled as completely innocent. Most often, heroes believe their chastity is under threat by an outside force, but the real cause is something internal: human weakness in denying temptation. Cantor also argues that heroes are never as innocent as they seem, but he takes his claim further than Jameson. While he believes a part of the hero must consent to evil in order to be possessed by it, some people might find this concept too problematic. Addressing their valid concerns, Cantor writes, “It may sound like blaming the victim, but folklore is relentless, and it suspects that good people must have an affinity with the evil they claim to abhor and reject” (50). In the end, folklore is a part of fiction, not reality. Magical narratives allude to human struggles, but they do so with the acknowledgment that vampires and witches do not exist in reality. Instead, the supernatural other acts as a mirror, reflecting back on humanity’s common weaknesses and flaws that make people who they are.

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