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FROM ‘LITTLE MAIDEN’ TO ‘THE WITCH’: EXPLORING THE THEMES OF VAMPIRISM, WITCHCRAFT AND THE FEMALE WANDERER THROUGH A BIOGRAPHICAL READING OF MARY COLERIDGE’S “THE WITCH”

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_____Shibangi Ghose

Abstract

As the legacy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge had been the author of several brilliant poems including one called “The Witch”. However, she has inherited much more than a simple recognition that being the descendant of one of the major Romantic Poets would warrant- she has also inherited romantic literary traditions and the Victorian fascination with the supernatural. This paper explores the riveting concept of the female wanderer alongside the supernatural figures of the vampire and the witch in Coleridge’s poem through a critical analysis of the author’s biography. In addition to that, I will also be discussing the justification of the title of the poem to analyse its historical significance. I will be focusing mostly on how all three themes can be classified as the ‘outcasts’ or the ‘other’, in the hope of shedding some light on how Coleridge locates herself in the male-dominated English literary canon.

Keywords: Wanderer, Supernatural, Outcast, Femininity, Mary Coleridge.

Supernatural beings like witches and subtle references to the figure of the vampire feature predominantly in most of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's poems, all of which depict her deep fascination with the gothic genre and strong dislike for the conventional Christian doctrines. While Coleridge has a tenuous relationship with her forebearer due to gender politics, it is evident that she has also been deeply influenced by the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, her reluctance to follow the literary traditions established by her ancestor also becomes an important part of her poem 'The Witch', where her inability to enter the male-dominated literary circles without express permission is portrayed via heavy symbolism to the readers. Katherine McGowran claims that Mary Coleridge is "haunted by the witches and demons of Samuel Taylor's texts" (McGowran 1996, 186), which is ironic considering that Mary's poem 'The Witch' is in dialogue with Samuel Taylor's more popular poem 'Christabel' and both have a witch as the titular character of their respective poems.

Wanderers and outcasts are recurring archetypes in the poems of Mary Coleridge. Due to her inclination for gothic elements and the supernatural in her poetry, the figures of witches and vampires populate her poem and serve several purposes. Vampires reached their height of popularity in the Victorian Era with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and the vampires became the perfect representation of the societal anxieties regarding scientific advancements and industrialisation prevalent during the time. Kate Buckley further explains that the "vampire doppelgangers of nineteenth-century literature embodied threatening forms of difference and Otherness which Victorian society was not willing to accept." (Buckley 2016, 27) As the vampires reflected the fears of the Victorian middle class like female sexuality and the animalistic side of humanity, it is worth noting that the most famous vampires of nineteenth-century literature were men. So, a female titular character exhibiting vampiric traits makes poems like 'The Witch' and 'Christabel'

even more interesting. Mary Coleridge's 'The Witch' makes the act of crossing over the threshold the central theme of the poem. This is rooted in the local lore that vampires need to be invited into the house and that evils like vampires are prone to deception. Similarly in the poem, the female character also pleads with the house owner to let her into their house by mentioning her pitiful circumstances and likely exaggerating her virtue and harmlessness, which might be the deception of the vampiric character at play. This is explicitly mentioned in the second stanza of the poem:

“The cutting wind is a cruel foe.

I dare not stand in the blast.

My hands are stone, and my voice a groan,

And the worst of death is past.

I am but a little maiden still,

My little white feet are sore.

Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!” (Coleridge, 1908)

The female character is unable to enter the house without being carried inside, which depicts the dichotomy between the helplessness of a young girl and the predatory nature of the vampire. The very idea that the titular character of the poem has faced several adversities and suffered physical harm from the harsh elements of nature to reach the house reinforces the notion of her being delicate and feminine as indicated by her sore 'little white feet', while also projecting a subtle sense of danger emanating from the young maiden as she must have been strong enough despite her appearances to have been able to survive until she reaches safety. This can also be interpreted as a portrayal of the female wanderer who is unable to reach safety without aid, which might have been very appealing to Victorian sensibilities. Both the figure of the vampire and the female character in the poem are outcasts of Victorian society, as evident from the fact that they

both portray the 'Otherness' in the world of literature. The female character of the poem is a wanderer who seeks to take shelter in the house she comes upon during her journey and in a sense drains the fire until the "quivering flame sank and died", just like the vampires prey upon humans and feast on their blood until their victims die or the victims are as dead and miserable like them.

However, it is ironic considering Mary Coleridge's pen name is *Anodos*, which is the Greek word for 'wanderer' as well. As Coleridge was widely read in both Greek and Hebrew, it is undeniable that the selection of her pen name was intentional to indirectly showcase her status as a poet in the male-centric English literary canon. The figure of the wanderer features quite often in her poems as it has significant ties that go beyond the words of the poem and has ties to the realities of her time as a woman belonging to the late Victorian Era. As a poet, Mary Coleridge faced difficulties in choosing whether to follow her great-great-uncle in his literary traditions or make the conscious decision to identify strongly with the female Victorian literary traditions. This might be the reason that there is a noticeable disparity in the 'I' figure in the last stanza as compared to the two stanzas before it, as it indicates the ever-changing perspective and internal struggle of Mary Coleridge in locating her own place in the established literary traditions. Katharine McGowran further affirms that "While the teller of the tale in fairy tales often affirms his or her identity, Coleridge seems to lose hers" (McGowran, 1996, 187). Before she became a part of the literary traditions, she was as much a wanderer in the field of literature and a vampiric figure benefitting from the fame of her ancestor until some kind person allowed her to enter the threshold of the famous literary circles that would bring her fame and recognition for her works. Jo Taylor further expands on this aspect:

"Like her 'Witch', and, indeed, like STC's Geraldine, Mary cannot cross over the threshold without an explicit invitation from the inhabitants of the domain; in this

case, those writers who have successfully gained entry into the canon. Mary recognises STC's place in Fairyland (he is her 'fairy great-great-uncle'), but as Geraldine had to be invited over the threshold of the castle by Christabel, and merely welcomed by Sir Leoline, so must Mary be invited into Fairyland by a 'fair god-mother'; she must be invited into the female canon before she is welcomed by the men." (Taylor, 2012, 82)

There is a very specific mention of being "a little maiden" made by the female character in the second stanza which is directly in contrast with the title of the poem 'The Witch'. The figure of the witch in both literature and reality is an outcast similar to the vampires, which is a reflection of the female wanderer in the poem. The idea of witchcraft became popular in Victorian Britain due to the sensationalism and scandal associated with it as a result of the new scientific discoveries occurring in close succession during this period. The reason for the Victorian craze for witchcraft has been mainly because although women were viewed as gentle and always under the 'protection' of their male family members, they were immediately granted autonomy as a result of social isolation that comes with being dubbed 'a witch'. In Coleridge's lifetime, the Women's Suffrage Movement in England was creating huge changes in society and had likely been an exceptional influence in her poems. Therefore, whispers about witchcraft and hysteria in women were made in excess by the Victorian patriarchy to ensure women's compliance to the Victorian patriarchal concept of the ideal woman, which is the trope of the 'Angel in the House'. Anne Llewellyn Barstow goes into detail regarding the conviction of women for witchcraft:

"Seen as a group of independent adults, women thus entered European legal history by being accused of witchcraft. And those accusations were heavily negative about female sexuality: women were blamed for preventing conception, causing

miscarriage, abortion, and stillbirth, making men impotent, seducing men, having sex with the devil, giving birth to demons.” (Barstow, 1988, 8)

The lingering suspicions regarding witchcraft and Victorian women had been expressed perfectly by Mary Coleridge in her poem ‘The Witch’. Even though the female speaker at the threshold asking to be let in claims herself to be a “little maiden still”, the poet has condemned her as a witch in the very title of the poem. When we consider the threshold, it can be a representation of the society that a witch is barred from entering and acts as a social barrier keeping her out until she is welcomed into the dwelling by the homeowner, which is a representation of a person who is already a part of the social group that she is excluded from. The last stanza of the poem clearly shows the consequences of the homeowner allowing the female speaker at the threshold to enter the domestic space:

“Her voice was the voice that women have,
Who plead for their heart’s desire.
She came – she came – and the quivering flame
Sank and died in the fire.
It never was lit again on my hearth” (Coleridge, 1908)

The first two lines of the last stanza hark back to the suffragette movement raging in Victorian England, for the voice of the witch is synonymous with the “voice that women have, who plead for their heart’s desire” that refers to the radical ideas of their time like women’s voting rights that Victorian women were fighting for. It can be possible from a certain perspective to say that the exclusion of Victorian women from voting and their speaking out in protest against it to force their entry into the very public space, is similar to the witch asking the homeowner to be allowed into their dwelling and the almost forceful entry into the domestic space as denoted by the

words “she came – she came”. The symbolism of the fire is worth of note in this poem, as there are several possible connotations regarding the death of the ‘quivering flame’. One of the possible analyses of the situation is that the evil power of witchcraft manages to extinguish the warmth of domesticity in the dwelling after the witch is allowed in. However, it is interesting to note that there is another analysis of the entire situation that explores the witch figure as the victim of the homeowner instead of the other way around. In the first draft of the poem, the last stanza had a few lines that were changed or removed in the final versions of the poem:

“Her voice was the voice all women have, when they plead for their heart's desire.
So in she came, & the quivering flame sank down & died in the fire,
And it never was lit again on the hearth & she leaves the house no more
Since I lifted her over the threshold, & let her in at the door!” (Coleridge, 1893)

If the speaker of the last stanza is a man, then the phrase ‘she leaves the house no more’ might be an illusion of the Victorian patriarchal shackles of domesticity that prevent the female speaker from leaving the house again. Marriage was a necessity for Victorian women to be able to live a life with relative financial stability, an achievement quite hard to earn on their own in Victorian society. ‘The Witch’ can also be read as the journey of the marriage of the female speaker in the first two stanzas, where she likely comes from a desperate situation portrayed by the words “the way was hard and long” and her plea to be carried over the threshold into the house is indicative of the Christian wedding tradition of lifting the bride and carrying her across the threshold of her new home. However, the moment the female wanderer is carried over the threshold, she ceases to have a voice of her own and the perspective switches to that of the homeowner, which represents the loss of autonomy in Victorian marriages. In this situation, the death of the fire in the hearth can be a representation of the death of the independent spirit of the

woman after marriage.

Coleridge's fascination with figures from folklore and her ability to interweave them with her personal experiences has resulted in her most famous works like 'The Witch'. Although a very simple poem at first glance, 'The Witch' encapsulates a wide range of experiences that Victorian women were facing during her lifetime. Henceforth, it is essential to ensure that the elements of the supernatural that she had inherited from her predecessor must be read carefully to be able to understand Mary Coleridge's place in the history of English Literature.

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