When Feminists Read the Romantics, or the Cultural Chasm of "Kubla Khan"

Anca Vlasopolos
Wayne State University

ABSTRACT

Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" offers the occasion for scrutinizing academic feminism since Romanticists and feminists regard this poem as a "founding myth" of our culture and is situated on the boundary of rivalling literary historiographies. Against Gilbert and Gubar's assessment of "Kubla" as touchstone of opposing feminisms, this author reads the poem as the site of a continuing clash between man-made poetics of form and the expression of female pleasure. Recognizing the dangers in totalizing gestures of academic feminism leads to enabling readings of gender-troubled Romantic texts and to re-examinations of power politics in academia, including those of feminist criticism.

RÉSUMÉ

"Kubla Khan" nous offre l'occasion d'examiner le féminisme académique du moment que ce poème de Coleridge est considéré, par les féministes autant que les critiques du romantisme, comme mythe culturel de base qui se situe au bord du territoire réclamé par des discours historiques rivalisants. Contre la thèse de Gilbert et Gubar, qui considèrent le texte en tant que terrain d'oppositions de points de vue féministes, cette auteure propose que "Kubla" nous représente toujours le conflit entre les rigueurs d'une poétique masculine et l'expression troublée d'une jouissance féminine. En découvrant les dangers d'un féminisme académique inflexible, nous nous rendons capables de récupérer les textes romantiques troublés par la question de la sexualité et d'interroger la politique du pouvoir, y compris le féminisme, dans les milieux académiques.

Our wickedness is one of the vertiginous themes that opens the space of writing. One writes in order to emerge from this hell in the direction of the hidden day. One writes toward what will prove to be the present. That's what paradise is, managing to live in the present. Acceptance of the present that occurs, in its mystery, in its fragility. It means accepting our lack of mastery. — Hélène Cixous

The urge for writing is always connected with the longing for something one would like to possess and master, something that escapes us... I have the impression that I recognize it also in the great writers whose voices seemed to reach me from the summit of an absolute experience. What they succeeded in conveying to us was an approach to experience, not an arrival; this kept intact all the seductions of desire. — Italo Calvino

WICKEDNESS, SEDUCTION, AND DESIRE are terms that are often invoked in readings of Romantic texts, and particularly of Coleridge's poetry. As in most of Coleridge's textual productions, the issue of mastery in its relation to form, origin and, recently, transmission, has provided the grounds for seemingly unresolvable debates about his control or lack of control over his material, whether prose, poetry, or even oral delivery.[1] A feminist in the last decade of the twentieth century who takes up the issue of mastery as it relates to a much-analyzed, if not overanalyzed, text such as "Kubla Khan" must address at least two fundamental questions: one, why should a feminist reread Coleridge's poetry instead of reading the newly discovered women poets contemporary with what is still called High Romanticism? Second, what are the political implications of a feminist's engagement with, and perhaps recuperation of, a canonical male Romantic text?

The answer to the first question is to some extent reactionary. I, for one, feel a compulsion to return to "Kubla Khan" when I see that, while feminist colleagues are rescuing a women's Romantic literature of unsuspected magnitude through their archival work, the mainstream critics seem to be drawing in the wagons around the canonical texts and shore them up against the ruins of new historicist and feminist readings.[2] Second, the discovery of "new facts" is inextricably tied to the "new strategies" of reading that resist the party line of literary history. Without this resistance, neither archival discoveries nor revaluations of the officially transmitted canon would command the attention of the academy.[3]

"Kubla Khan" as poetic act offers the occasion for yet another look at academic feminism and mainstream Romanticist readings of poetry because, as we shall see, the poem is still firmly situated on the claimable, the *réclamable,* boundary of rivalling discourses and literary historiographies. What I propose, both as a view of the poem and as an overview of critiques surrounding it, is nothing less than that we try to invent a vocabulary for dealing with the otherness of a text rather than reabsorb it into accustomed and comfortable modes of reading patterned on familiar and familial models. Such a destabilizing practice is already in existence — and not in place — in a number of feminist publications and presentations of the last decade.[4] However, perhaps because of the enormous influence of new-historicist approaches to Romanticism and the furiously oedipal rivalry between new historicism and the long-established Frye-Abrams-Bloom dominance of the field, the feminist reading *en abîme* rather than beyond the margins has met with strong academic resistance in Romantic studies, nowhere more clearly than in a 1989 article entitled "The Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections of Feminist Criticism."[5]

In this article, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that: one, "Kubla Khan" is a "romantic touchstone" both as a "founding myth of [our originating] culture" and "because of its explicit sexualization of the dreaming poet's concerns about creativity" (165, 160); and, two, that its "uncanny dreamwork might illuminate aspects of the romantic imagination that Abrams did not touch upon but which imply unexpected connections between the birth of feminism and the rise of romanticism while also raising interesting questions about women's place in the aesthetic revolution of the early nineteenth century" (160). Since the "unexpected connections," as well as the specific connection of the uncanny with the feminine, have been articulated in print for some years, we might ask ourselves why we need at this time to engage with Gilbert and Gubar's latest foray into interpreting the Romantics.[6] First, in the article, Gilbert and Gubar read Coleridge's poem as a demonstration of the transcendent feminist praxis they advocate, which turns out to be a dressing up of freudbloomian anxieties, or the familiar in drag. Second and equally significant, the article purports to be the last word on the state of present academic feminism, which, since it is printed in a collection published by a prestigious press (Routledge), edited by a well-known scholar (Ralph Cohen) and entitled *The Future of Literary Theory,* has the academic power to shape the future by means of the historiography of feminism that it inscribes.

Based on a critique of Gilbert and Gubar's totalizing account of the present state of feminist

studies and on a counter-reading of "Kubla Khan" not as a male dream but as an extreme confrontation of gender in canonical Romantic poetry, my argument here will consist of two strands that will intertwine rather than unravel or contrast with one another. These strands rise from what I see as present needs: first, we need to look critically at directions in feminist studies in order to continue the political agenda of feminism as opposed to vitiating its revolutionary content. Secondly, we need to claim "Kubla Khan," along with other Romantic texts, not as adversaries to feminist goals but as texts that enable feminist thinking and critical practice.

What can academic feminists and, specifically, feminists who work on Romanticism do? My immediate suggestion would be that practitioners in this area both pay heed to and quote more than the top ten academic feminists; in other words, that they not insulate themselves from developments and currents in feminist thinking of the last decade simply because they appear under names not instantly recognized or under titles that, through a comparative approach, question hegemonic cultural assumptions from which even feminists are not exempt.[7]

Perhaps a program of what to do is more problematic and, therefore, more difficult to articulate than cautions about what not to do. In the same collection in which the Gilbert and Gubar article appears, Showalter decries "the tendency of such writers as Toril Moi to construct rigid binary oppositions of feminist thought" and the unfortunate "polarization of feminist discourse along dualistic lines."[8] She ascribes this tendency exclusively either to writers in sympathy with French feminist developments or to the French feminists themselves, whereas blameless American critics are up on gynesic criticism. For example, Gilbert edited *La Jeune Née,* and Barbara Johnson "is currently working on black women writers," while *The Madwoman in the Attic* has not yet been translated into French (366).[9] Apart from the melancholy truth that, as a rule, American critics have to wait for the translation whereas their continental counterparts are still capable of reading works in languages other than English, Showalter was apparently not apprised of Gilbert and Gubar's essay to be published almost side by side with hers which, by its very title, reinforces and, by its very place in the publishing world, institutionalizes the "rigid binary oppositions" to which she objects: the mirror and the vamp.

Why should feminism oppose the binary oppositions that have provided us with such classics of philosophy and criticism as *Being and Nothingness, The Lion and the Honeycomb, The Mirror and the Lamp*? Revolutionary feminism, even without a Derridian basis, disrupts the comfort of binary arrangements by exposing both the implicit hierarchical relationship of the two concepts or tropes that are separated by a conjunction, hyphen or virgule, and the political assumptions that underlie the division, the classic one being male/female. As Butler cautions us, "feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism."[10] Via Derrida, Gayatri Spivak speaks to the issue of thinking in binaries and unmasks the process of binary classification:

> The political content of marginality ... implicit in the production of any explanation ... the choice of particular binary oppositions by our participants is no mere intellectual strategy. It is, in each case, the condition of the possibility for centralization ... and, correspondingly, marginalization.

Spivak adds:

> We think we conquer an unknown field by dividing it repeatedly into twos, when in fact we might be acting out the scenario of class [marginalization-centralization] and trade [knowledge is power].[11]

Should we read Gilbert and Gubar's "Mirror and the Vamp" as an "intellectual strategy" of centralization-marginalization — in this case, centralizing and consolidating the idea of a good American feminist practice as opposed to a bad French feminist theory — or should we see this classification of feminism as a playful exercise in logical argumen-

tation, with "mirror" as thesis, "vamp" as antithesis, and Gilbert and Gubar's last word as triumphant synthesis?

Gilbert and Gubar proceed from two assumptions — suspect in themselves — that the mirror-lamp analogy gives an encompassing explanation of Classicism versus Romanticism, and that their mirror-vamp version provides the key to what "most contemporary feminists" are doing, as well as completing Abrams' own analogy from an even more inclusive, higher perspective that surveys and overrides both mirror-lamp and mirror-vamp approaches to Romanticism. Thus, despite Gilbert and Gubar's dedication of their article to Abrams — "with admiration and affection" — they ultimately claim political purity here by admitting to no alliances in their reading of "Kubla Khan" — not even with empiricist American critics.

In Gilbert and Gubar, the mirror and the vamp become metaphors for American and French feminist methods, but they cannot function in regard to the same field as the one cleft by Abrams' metaphors.[12] That is, whereas the mirror and the lamp as Classicism and Romanticism are artistic methods of approaching the real and creating texts, Gilbert and Gubar's mirror is not a practice of American feminism so much as an assumption about literature and its relation to history:

> they [Classical, i.e., American empirical feminists] implicitly define the function of criticism at the present time as the mirroring — the transcription — of a knowable history constituted by real authors, real readers, and objectively verifiable cultural conditions.

Their vamp, on the other hand, is not an assumption about literature and reality in French feminism but a metaphor for what those bad French girls are or pose as:

> these theorists [French and Anglo-American sympathizers] implicitly define the function of criticism at the present time as a defiantly inspired and demonically sensual attack on — indeed, as seduction and betrayal of — patriarchal systems of thought. (145)

Despite the parallelism, Gilbert and Gubar implicitly define the Classical feminists by what they do and the Romantic French by what they are, and both are diminished by the respective metaphor. Associating the mirror with feminism brings extremely unfortunate associations, as Gilbert and Gubar, with their sensitivity to textual nuances, should not have failed to notice. Women who mirror appear, as in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* as reflections of men's images, incapable of challenging the male conceptual framework of historical criticism:

> they [Classical feminists] question received modes of periodization and evaluation, but they do not, as a rule, challenge the concepts of reality which underlie the very concepts of periodization and evaluation. (145)

When they do challenge those very concepts and, therefore, cease to mirror, that is, when they move from descriptive critique to prescriptive criticism, they are still found wanting, or wanting even more.

> For when the mirror of description becomes a tool of prescription, its surface clouds so that ... the critic can perceive in it only what she wants to see. (151)

In other words, when the critic changes from mirroring male reality, she becomes the narcissist who sees only herself or her desire and not empirical reality, that "knowable history," that Gilbert and Gubar take for granted as the terrain from which to transcend.

What happens to the vamp, and need I point out the even more unfortunate associations implied in the conjunction of vamp and feminist? On the one hand, "she seeks to write a mystic anti-history of what is not and never has been," "she produces ... essentially meta-critical meditations on the cultural processes of signification" (153). What is wrong with these practices? They "ultimately fall into the narcissistic mode," they "appropriate for themselves ... solipsistic authority." Gilbert and Gubar accuse the vamp of "boundless ambition," in the service of which she engages in an "intellectual striptease," displaying "not the recalcitrant autonomy of the world of the text but the naked brilliance

of the text of her desire" (156). Gilbert and Gubar's argument, then, is against the feminist desire, whether it be the "mirror" critic's sociopolitical desire rising from a response to patriarchal historiography or the "vamp" critic's genderpolitical desire informed by a resolute rejection of mirroring categories of patriarchal thought. This impulse to censure and police manifestations of desire in feminism, posing as the sage transcendent overview, does not bode well either as "reflections on feminism" or for a rereading of "Kubla Khan." Again, I return to Spivak's trenchant critique of intellectual strategies of totalization:

> The production of theoretical explanations and descriptions must ... be taken to be the worthiest task to be performed towards any "phenomenon"; it must be seen as the best aid to enlightened practice and taken to be a universal and unquestioned good. Only then can the operation of the binaries begin. It is this unspoken premise that leads us to yet another "intellectual strategy," not necessarily articulated with the splitting into binaries: the declaration of a project to integrate things into adequate and encompassing explanations. The integration is sometimes explicitly, and always implicitly, in the name of the sovereign mind. (114)

The sovereign mind, appearing in Gilbert and Gubar's account as the academy, is to accommodate the "uncanny" feminine and feminist alike, without respect to heterogeneity between and within those terms. In the conclusion to their reflections, Gilbert and Gubar propose that their very use of metaphors:

> similar to, if different from, those which govern other forms of critical discourse means that we can enter into precisely the dialogues that will allow us to see in a new light an image of the shifting cultural heritage we are continually seeking to change. (166)

But how "different from" other forms — whose forms? — of critical discourse are these metaphors? Is not the suggestion of entering into this sort of dialogue both naive and complicit since we should instead continue to question those power relations that inform and sustain the dialogic mode, which is not normatively a conversation between equals? Let us be canny in determining whether Gilbert and Gubar's reading of "Kubla Khan" sheds a new light or mirrors the familiar freudbloomian anxieties.

Gilbert and Gubar begin their survey of "Kubla" with two caricatured readings: one by fictive mirror critic, a damsel in "distress at the demonic poet's desire to appropriate and incorporate female fruit ... and maternal fluid," the other by the vamp, who would celebrate Coleridge for his alliance with her "own valorization of sorceress and hysteric, of choric pulsions and silences, of disruptive cries and whispers" (161). After having demolished the straw fictive stances of both "schools,"[13] Gilbert and Gubar propose their own reading, which consists of more Bloom and more Freud:

> "Kubla Khan" can be read as an uncannily anxious vision of female sexuality and male belatedness.... What the ostensibly slumbering poet of "Kubla Khan" dreams, after all, is a revisionary version of the family romance [in which] the father, though powerful, has lost his omnipotence while the mother, though still desirable, is far more daunting than Freud's version of Jocasta. (161)

Thus, the uncanny feminine or daunting Jocasta (or, more cannily, if we call her by her Freudian name, the phallic mother) blocks the speaker's access to Kubla and Coleridge's access to his literary forefathers Milton and Shakespeare. Revolutionary Romanticism, Gilbert and Gubar contend, opened culture to the forces of the anti-rational and left its "male artists ... not only oppressed by the burden of the past but threatened by what was analogically 'the feminine' in themselves" (163). To conclude, a feminist reading of "Kubla Khan," according to Gilbert and Gubar, teaches us to complement Bloom's mapping of anxiety toward the father with the "more horrifying" anxiety of the poet toward his mother, toward "the unfathomable forces of the feminine" (163).

In reading Gilbert and Gubar's article, I found that my work, as well as the work of other feminists and even of Romanticist authorities such as McGann, was exiled beyond the margins, in the

wilderness of works not listed and not consulted. This neglect of a real opposition, in contrast to the fictive one fabricated by Gilbert and Gubar, tends to produce for me a less benign view of academic politics than the conciliatory version in "The Mirror and the Vamp." For several years, I circulated a paper entitled "The Mastery of Closure and the Openings of Desire in 'Kubla Khan,'" which met with a resistance that was reflected in the inability of the rejecting readers to address it as a feminist argument. That argument appeared in abridged version in the article I did publish in 1987, entitled "'Deep Romantic Chasm': Women as Textual Disturbances in Romantic Poetry." The argument is as follows:

> A study of closure in "Kubla Khan" in the context that Coleridge dreamed up for it discloses the chasm that the poem never bridges, a chasm that haunted Coleridge's work and made it perhaps the most powerfully visionary, but also the most burdened by incompleteness, of Romantic poetry. That chasm, inhabited eternally and indirectly by woman's loss of erotic satisfaction ... appears in the geography of Romantic poems in various guises.... [It] becomes the voice without language that the Romantic poets were capable of representing but not of translating into what feminism ... has called the dominant discourse; the "lawless" females [examples follow] shriek, wail, sob, moan, weep, speak in "language strange," remain impervious to consolations ... or bland general pieties. (35–36)

In taking up my counter reading, I will begin with a quotation from McGann's *Social Values and Poetic Acts* that arches back to the epigraphs I selected:

> Poems are not mirrors and they are not lamps, they are social acts — readings and writings which promote, deploy, and finally celebrate those processes of loss which make up the very essence of human living.... This [the form of losses and incommensurates] is the eventuality of poetry — not its structure, but its fate ... loss [projected] as a *catastrophic event,* the image and splendor of a world where everything hovers equally on the brink of the fully possible and the utterly impossible — for good or ill alike.[14]

To say that "Kubla Khan" is a poem of loss and of transgression is to reiterate much that has been said of the poem from the time of Coleridge's own commentary to the present. Feminism, however, helps us address the questions "Loss of what?" and "Transgression against what or whom?" in ways that have either not been explored or have only been touched upon in mainstream criticism. In my article, I chose to foreground the issue of closure because closure implies a mastery of the textual material that, in his introduction and epigraph, Coleridge questioned in a way that opens toward feminist issues of formal propriety as respect for property.[15] Coleridge succeeded only insofar as the critical history of the poem contains an ongoing and unresolvable dispute about "Kubla Khan" as finished or fragmentary.[16] Yet the very terms we use — closure, finished, ending, and fragment — remain bound to an ideal of poetic form that is inextricably tied to mastery as the Law of the Master. The Romantic poets subscribed to this ideal of poetic form, at least in their critical pronouncements about the forms and ends of poetry, and Romanticist critics have repeatedly identified formal control with the *beau idéal* of poetry.[17] Coleridge himself, in his definition of the Secondary Imagination, sees artistic creation as necessarily coexisting with the conscious will and not the errant subconscious, and the disjunction between his praxis as poet and his theories of culture lead Mileur to assert:

> The Mystery Poems [of which "Kubla" is one] are an explanation in themselves, for they indicate not only the degree to which Coleridge is alienated from his own poetic practice but also his conviction that he does not understand his own poetry. This is important because it is Coleridge's basic ability to comprehend his personal alienation and the accompanying anxiety as a failure of understanding — something to be remedied by an improved comprehension — that determines the subsequent course of his career. (88)

In my reading of "Kubla Khan," I propose that the loss in the poem is not related to the kind of mastery that Mileur sees Coleridge seeking assiduously during his later career as a cultural critic. Rather, loss relates to a concept of mastery that in

"Kubla Khan" is willingly suspended and, to some extent, even abjured. Nor is the transgression a rivalry with the creative powers of God, be he Milton's bogey or Kubla or the Father. I might add that this view of transgression as oedipal in Coleridge's texts is particularly tenacious in Coleridgean criticism, being strongly connected to the freud-bloomian theory of creative anxiety and providing a comfortable reduction of sociopolitical tensions to the family romance of intertextuality.[18] However, as we know from Coleridge's 1816 preface to "Kubla," living people tend to interfere with and influence textual production, in the case of "Kubla Khan" either by interrupting the poet's creative *otium* with matters of busy-ness as did the man from Porlock, or like Byron rescuing the poem from the poet's misgivings, which kept it to the privacy of manuscript, and helping to hurl it into the public arena of print.

In his introduction, Coleridge calls his poem "a psychological curiosity," which should be judged as such rather "than on the ground of any supposed *poetic* merit."[19] Having questioned the identity of the product, he goes on to destabilize the process of creation:

> if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things,* with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. (296)

Coleridge then informs the reader, "the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him," but he adds, "the to-morrow is yet to come" (297), a phrase that could serve as epigraph for the connections between Romanticism and feminism as well as sum up the two epigraphs of this paper. The struggle the poet faces and successfully defers is not with inchoate material but with a supplement, a vision given to him, as it were, by the pharmakon, the drug that induced the reverie. "Kubla Khan," then, remains as a trace not of anxiety or struggle, but of unmerited, not-worked-for, pleasure, a dream to be contrasted according to Coleridge's publishing designs, to one "of pain and disease," namely "The Pains of Sleep" that followed it in the 1816 collection, and more importantly with the work, the making, that would be required for completing, for mastering that excess of vision. Consequently, a systematic policing of desire such as the one Gilbert and Gubar enforce might accord well with Coleridge's later qualms of conscience over ungovernable excess, but not with the text or even the preface of "Kubla Khan."

So far I have argued for what "Kubla Khan" is not. The following I offer as a pro/visional or pre/visional reading of a poem which, instead of inscribing belatedness and remaining a fragment, trails off into the non-finito, the invisible ink of the milk narrative, the annunciation story for which we have no words as yet.[20] The poem begins with a supremely male search for pleasure — Kubla's decree for his dome — manifesting itself in a series of closural gestures of mastery over "fertile ground," now "girdled round" by walls and towers. However, the dome itself never appears except as a *mise-en-abîme* of shadow, not even reflection, floating on waves, and as the mediating utterance, "It was a miracle...," that concludes the Xanadu section. Not until line 36 do we find that the pleasure-dome is indeed a device, a conceit, the clichéed Petrarchan oxymoron for unrequited passion: fire and ice — the sunny dome with caves of ice.[21]

Our attention has been diverted from the encircling moves initiated by the Khan's decree to the exceptional, the excepted "deep romantic chasm" from which turmoil and tumult erupt, carrying within them a rupture in the master text of present and future power, of pleasure by decree. In the second stanza, the syntax becomes ruptured, the meaning indeterminate. How does a feminist reader address the famous simile, "as holy and enchanted/ As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/By woman wailing for her demon-lover"? Is one way to locate the ruptured diction of the simile: this chasm, "a savage place," is as holy and enchanted as any that, as one that, as itself, was haunted? The other is to note Coleridge's disruption of patriarchal logic in his choice of adjectives: "savage," "holy" and "enchanted," instead of being compatible attributes, contaminate each other with the proximity of holiness and savagery, of religion and sorcery

that they proffer. The haunting itself appears as a contradiction, since generic "natural" woman bewails the absence of the supernatural, of a chasm no longer inhabited by "her demon-lover." Could this place haunted by wails of lost erotic pleasure be encompassed within the walls of Xanadu? Or does it enter only on the slant, as the chronologically arresting simile "as e'er," a supplemental trope?

By invoking woman's pleasure and implying that it remains both beyond and at the unmastered core of the province of "natural" male power, Coleridge introduces in "Kubla Khan" an excess that, following the French feminists (pace Gilbert and Gubar), at this time in history I can afford to call "clitoral," but which Coleridge could only articulate through the yearned-for visitation of the un-natural, the uncanny, the demonic. Evelyne Sullerot writes, "nature has programmed female sexual pleasure independently from the needs of production," and Spivak reminds us that "the precomprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as sex object, or as a means or agent of reproduction" (Spivak, 151). "Kubla Khan" begins with what we now may call "the uterine social organization" that suppresses or excludes woman's pleasure. Coleridge interrupts the master narrative with the apostrophe ("But, oh!"), not to take in, nor to leave out, but to open the circle toward the vertigo of abysmal space, space experienced as depth and as measureless in opposition to the carefully laid out "uterine" perimeter of the enclosed Xanadu. Mellor may argue that the fountain bursting from the chasm presents "an image that is simultaneously ejaculative and parturitive" but, unlike either ejaculation or parturition, and like clitoral excess, the fountain "at once and ever" flings up the sacred river Alph (7). Since woman's erotic pleasure has remained outside the reproductive scenario and the uterine social organization, it has also, until recently, remain outside language. "Woman" in "Kubla Khan" speaks in the non-language of the wail, haunts the edges of language in the growing darkness of a waning moon.

The second female principle in the poem is not generic but is not definite: "a damsel," "an Abyssinian maid." She, too, enters the spatial organization of the poem on the slant, as the visitation of a vision. Her absence, like that of the demon-lover, leaves the poet to haunt the chasm between vision and blindness and wail for the conditions necessary to resuscitate her music and to experience the "deep delight" that would in turn make him savage, holy, and enchanted. I would argue that what distinguishes Coleridge from the other High Romantics and their participation in the post-revolutionary "feminization" of culture is precisely his voicing disruptive female sexuality rather than feminine virtues. Might we therefore not see in a poet who waits to be penetrated, inhabited, by a vision of female power in order to be won to "deep delight," a poet with a clitoris? "Kubla Khan" is not the first or last time Coleridge gives us a speaker who situates himself in a "feminine" position (e.g., "To William Wordsworth") versus the dominating muse. In a dazzling move that has caused readers to regard the Xanadu and the vision sections of the poem as discontinuous, Coleridge inverts the dis/possessed, wailing woman and the demon-lover of Xanadu into the disconsolate, severed male "I," who "would" if only he "could," and the daemonic power alone capable of giving him "deep delight," the damsel. Subverting Miltonic demonology, Coleridge has the daemon, notably the Abyssinian maid or maid of the Abyss or chasm or caverns measureless to man, sing of Mount Abora (Aberration), a place that is neither the false Amara nor the true Eden, but an elsewhere that the poet needs to locate in order to "build" not on earth but "in air."[22] Given the ingenious interpretations of Abora as Aboriginal, a reaching beyond Milton to the very origin of the Logos, why should I insist on this aberrant reading of Mount Abora as a vision beyond language, beyond the compass of Logos itself?[23] Could the speaker revive the non-language — "her symphony and song" — he would transgress not in rivalling the creative power of God, Kubla, or the Father, but in imaging that which must not and cannot be seen, so that "all who heard should see them there,/And all should cry ...close your eyes with holy dread." Why should "they" not see the single, unified image of "rare device," the dome *with* caves of ice? What "they" would see, instead, is heterogeneity — "see them there,/That sunny

dome! those caves of ice" — the dispersal of the male singular as the site of sexual pleasure.

However, pleasure as erotic fulfilment uncontained by girdles, walls, domes, circles of holy dread, and other manifestations of territorial and formal mastery, seems unattainable given the losses in the poem. "Kubla Khan" is entrenched in loss at every level — the Khan's prophesied loss of empire, civilization's loss of the wondrous Xanadu, woman's loss of the demon-lover, the speaker's loss of the damsel's music, Coleridge's loss of the rest of the poem. The very lovers or partners themselves are separated by the chasm of impossibility: woman's lover is a demon; man's exotic animating, a capricious vision. Yet, with its emphatic ending on "Paradise," should we not agree with Perkins that "though in logic and grammar the poem does not conclude positively, for the imagination it ends triumphantly" (103)? I think not, because the poem does not end. Rather, it "hovers equally on the brink of the fully possible and the utterly impossible," on the condition of access and acceptance of pleasure that, textual and sexual, must win us to delight, not leave us wailing. The very "triumph" of the poem's end turns on an acceptance of the milk narrative of feeding and drinking, a constitutive mode of female power and identity, rather than on a continued dependence on the blood narrative of prohibiting fathers, whose ancestral voices prophesy war and compel the auditors to close their eyes with holy dread against the vision resuscitated by the speaker's music.

Coleridge's insistence on the non-finito in the 1816 volume, which consisted of *Christabel,* "Kubla Khan," and "The Pains of Sleep," links his resistance to endings with his yearning for a discourse not yet invented or one heard in wails and music, but not yet translatable into the man-made poetics of form. "The Conclusion to Part II" of *Christabel* foregrounds the problematics of a language that Coleridge knew he could not solve in a way that points to the problematics of a feminist theory articulated in an already overdetermined and fettered language. Reflecting on the nature of pleasure, the speaker of the ironically titled "Conclusion" comes to the realization that language has no expression for an excess of love except in words of "rage and pain," a realization that inevitably confronts any late-twentieth-century writer who looks for ways to describe sexual pleasure.

If the three poems published together in 1816 register such spectacularly wrecked attempts both at love and at mastering poetic form, what did Coleridge want? Perhaps simply this: what we make of his text in our present need. As for the desideratum for the future of feminist criticism, let us keep yearning and working toward an invention, not reinvention, toward vision, not revision, of a language we do not yet have rather than fall back into the metaphors that classify by dividing and conquering, the metaphors that serve as keys to the academic kingdom for the feminists who ally themselves with the sovereign powers and leave us others in the elsewhere whose envisioning provokes holy dread.

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NOTES

1. Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Vision and Revision: Coleridge's Art of Immanence* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) interprets the secondary imagination as "asserting its control" over the materials of the primary imagination in the same way that the preface to "Kubla Khan" attempts to assert control over the materials of the poem; at the Conference on Revolutionary Romanticism: 1770-1990 (Bucknell University, March 1990), Jon Klancher presented the complex

problem of transmission and distribution of Coleridge's Shakespearean lectures also in the context of control or lack thereof over utterance and text alike.

2. For instance, at the Conference on Revolutionary Romanticism, Helen Vendler, a keynote speaker, used the occasion to deliver a diatribe entitled, "'Tintern Abbey': Two Assaults" against new-historicist and feminist approaches to Wordsworth.
3. Donna Landry addressed precisely the issue of accommodation and resistance in her paper, "Commodity Feminism," delivered at the Conference on the Ends of Theory (Wayne State University, March 1990), by commenting on "the readiness of [her] fellow eighteenth-century scholars to endorse, in principle at least, [her] research on laboring-class women poets, when other kinds of feminist work in the eighteenth century were being savaged" (18).
4. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987); Ellen Rooney, *Seductive Reasonings: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).
5. "The Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections of Feminist Criticism," *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (London: Routledge, 1989), 144-166.
6. For connections between feminism and Romanticism, see *Feminism and Romanticism,* ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988), Mary Jacobus' *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), Margaret Homans' *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980); for explicit connections between the feminine uncanny and Romanticism, see Anca Vlasopolos' "'Deep Romantic Chasm': Women as Textual Disburbances [sic] in Romantic Poetry," *Gender, Power, Value,* ed. Judith Genova (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987), 31-40.
7. See for instance Nancy Miller's discussion of the theoretical implications of the woman writer's plot in *La Princesse de Clèves* and *The Mill on the Floss* in her "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA* 96 (1981), rpt. in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory,* ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 339-360; Naomi Schor's study of the fall and rise of detailism through its association and dissociation with femininity in *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987); and Margaret Higonnet's exploration and gender identity in two Romantic novels by male writers in "Writing from the Feminine: *Lucinde* and *Adolphe,*" *Annales Benjamin Constant* 5 (1985), 17-35.
8. Showalter, "A Criticism of Our Own: Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro-American and Feminist Literary Theory," 347-369; 350, 366.
9. With this unfortunate phrasing, Showalter splits feminist critics, who appear as agents and subjects, from the African-American writers, who become the objects of study.
10. See Butler, 13.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1986), 113-4.
12. As metaphors for Classicism and Romanticism, both mirror and lamp are used in rhetorically empowering ways: in holding the mirror up to nature, Classicism re-presents the real. Its ability to reflect captures reality, while its angle of refraction gives the mirroring the necessary interpretive power. In illuminating reality, the Romantic artist has the power to shed light, to highlight, and to obscure nature. The mimetic and the expressive modes operate in the familiar continuity of art as representation of the confrontation of nature and human nature. My scope here is not to examine the terms used by Abrams to describe literary history, but rather to contrast his empowering rhetorical stance with Gilbert and Gubar's insistence on debilitating metaphors of feminism.
13. The term "schools" is particularly offensive to women of my generation who had to train in feminism not only without the benefit of academic instruction but under the burden of disapproval and punishment from the academy. As Landry observes, feminism has only recently come into the academy from its out-of-school status: "Some of us got our feminism in women's groups, community activism, and reading groups, in an oppositional relation to the institution in which we were studying" (16). I imagine the term to be equally offensive to women who have come of age at a time when feminism and theory are no longer separate and bizarre marginal programs of graduate curricula but part of the same enterprise, a situation to which Rooney speaks:

    > the distinctions between "feminist critique" and "gynocritics" (Elaine Showalter) or between an Anglo-American emphasis on practice, experience, and politics and a French emphasis on theory, the unconscious, and the signifier (Toril Moi) are often written into a narrative of stages, early and late, innocent, then knowing; these narratives simply do not apply in the same way to feminist critics who apprenticed themselves to women's studies and literary theory at the same time — who, indeed, sometimes fruitfully confused the two in their own theoretical and political practices. (8)

14. Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of Literary Work* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988), 246-7.
15. Parker reads in the word "property" the older antecedent, "propriety," and defines it as "'property' in the sense of the establishment of boundaries — and the prohibition of trespass fundamental to a society [the 18th century] based on the laws of private possession" (162).
16. For debates about "Kubla Khan" as a fragment poem, see Timothy Bahty, "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and the Fragment of Romanticism," *MLN* 96 (1981), 1035-50; Anne Janowitz, "Coleridge's 1816 Volume: Fragment as Rubric," *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985), 21-39; Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of Form* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986); Balachandra

Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985); Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981); E.S. Shaffer, *Kubla Khan and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Literature and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975).

17. Romantic pronouncements about the nature of poetry often disclose a nostalgia for an eschatology in a geometric or architectural form, or in an exact correspondence of the sublunary and the eternal. Notorious examples are Wordsworth's famous description of his *oeuvre* as a gothic cathedral, Coleridge's repeated descriptions of the ideal poem as the *ouroboros* (the snake with its tail in its mouth), Shelley's insistence on the interpenetration of "eternal truth" in the "very image of life" that a poem contains. These Romantic poets express their desire for control over the movement of history, the representation of life, and the shape of their own work by means of metaphors that invoke formal mastery. The contradiction between their poetic achievement and their theoretical ideals strongly suggests that they undermined and exploded their own eschatological aspirations; that, in practice, they recognized the futility and even perniciousness of a textual mastery that functioned as censorship. In regard to "Kubla," Mileur argues that the preface to the poem functions as the secondary imagination in controlling the materials of the primary imagination, that is, the poem itself (27), whereas the preface, in my view, destabilizes any illusion of closure that the poem achieves.
18. See most recently David Perkins, "The Imaginative Vision of *Kubla Khan:* On Coleridge's Introductory Note," *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism and Adam's Dream,* ed. J. Robert Barth, S.J., and John L. Mahoney (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1990), 97-108. He interprets the transgression in "Kubla" as "the vision of poetry and the poet ... rivalling the creative power of God and/or the demonic" (106).
19. Coleridge, *Poetical Works,* ed. E.H. Coleridge (London: Oxford, 1912; rpt. 1967), 295. All quotations from Coleridge refer to this text.
20. In a paper read at the International Conference on Writing and Language: The Politics and Poetics of Feminist Critical Practice and Theory (Dubrovnik, May 1988), Jane Marcus argued toward a theory of the "milk narrative" based on an out-of-print novel of Sylvia Townsend Warner and contrasted this mother line of historical and anthropological knowledge to the "blood narrative" of phallogocentric history consisting of records of wars and conquests. Elizabeth W. Harries, in a paper entitled "The 'Space' of the Fragment: Problems of Space, Time, and Genre" presented at the 16th ICLA Congress (Munich, 1988), argues that "though non-chronological and non-developmental, fragmented texts remind us constantly of the temporal order they refuse" (9), her paper foregrounds the problematics of representing the non-... in an already closed linguistic system.
21. The Petrarchan allusion is not far-fetched given the newly discovered context of Romantic poetry. In a paper entitled "Wordsworth's Sonnets: Revolution and CounterRevolution" presented at the Conference on Revolutionary Romanticism, 1770-1990 (Bucknell University, March 1990), Ramona Ralston uncovered the late-eighteenth-century female sonneteer tradition, as well as the fact that "Petrarch's sonnets ... came into vogue in this period [1775-1795], as shown by the numerous translations and adaptations of his poems" (4).
22. De Lauretis theorizes this "elsewhere" of language in *Technologies of Gender* as existing "in the margins of hegemonic discourses, ... in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus" (25).
23. See Leslie Brisman, *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978), 21-33; Mileur on Abora as Originating Word, 82.