# Homoerotics of romantic poetry

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In the work of the Romantic poets, there is a clear disparity in the representation of male and female homoerotics. While male homosexual poetry is generally characterised by a careful synthesis of personal feeling and an imagined homosocial tradition in Hellenism, female homoerotics are typically torn between an extreme degree of sexual sublimation into the ‘ romantic friend’ ideal and a voyeuristic male heterosexual fantasy that is nevertheless pervaded by a sense of panic induced by the presentation of female sexuality. That is, ostensibly lesbian poetry undergoes a process of heterosexualisation that dilutes (and may in fact, entirely undo) any liberating potential the poem would have otherwise possessed. Moreover, while gay male narratives are privileged within a mythologised Hellenistic context and become purified and validated therein, specifically lesbian poetry is denied access to Sapphic tradition. Thus, lesbians become de-Hellenised in Romantic poetry and the reader is alienated from a positive tradition of female homoerotics. In ‘ To lady Eleanor Butler . . .,’ Wordsworth describes the romantic friendship of the Ladies of Llangollen. The poem is pervaded by a sense of sisterhood and close friendship without being overtly sexual and thus avoiding a cursory reading of the poem as a male fantasy – predicting later attempts by female writers to ‘ articulate an explicitly female sexual agency free from male-imposed constraints and expectations’#. This technique also reflects the general view of such relationships in the period – being that ‘ female pairs might, if they maintained a façade of genteel respectability, be acclaimed, after the fashion of the day, as idealised “ romantic friends.”’ In line with this view, the relationship between the women is related mainly through euphemism and code, describing the

women’s house as a ‘ Vale of Friendship’ for the ‘[s]isters in love’. This conscious use of euphemistic expression is also reflected in Wordsworth emphasis on the act of naming and linguistic cipher in the poem, hypothesising the origins of the name of the vale and postulating a new name by which it may be called while simultaneously recognising the inherent, natural benevolence of the place regardless of its name. However, the way in which Wordsworth constructs space in the poem is significant. Through the title and narrative focus on place, he creates a well-defined spatial framework in which this poem operates. Although the space is characterised by its connection with nature and thus privileged in accordance with Romantic tradition there seems to be an indication of this space as being the only one in which lesbian desire can be expressed, in which the ladies’ love can be ‘ allowed to climb . . . above the reach of time’. Thus, the poem implicitly recognises its own homophobic context and through its construction of a safe space for lesbian representation also defines a dangerous space.‘ Christabel and Geraldine’ (lines 236-277 from ‘ Christabel’) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge constructs a representation of female homoerotics that is, in many ways opposed to that of Wordsworth’s discussed earlier. Superficially, the poem can be read as an empathetic exploration of tortured and unspeakable lesbian desire through the construction of Christabel and Geraldine as lovers. However, it is important to note that this reading can never go beyond empathy due to the omnipresent male persona. This persona (if we are to understand it as being Coleridge himself; that is, a heterosexual and indeed, very probably homophobic# male) thus informs the reader’s understanding of lesbian

desire in the poem. If read in this way, the narrative becomes overwhelmed with two simultaneous and potentially contradictory moods: heterosexual panic and fantastic male voyeurism. The physical descriptions of Christabel and Geraldine act to anatomise (and thus objectify) the female characters by describing their constituent body parts: ‘ Her gentle limbs’, ‘ her lids’, ‘ her elbow’ and ultimately, ‘ her breast’. Conspicuously absent from these erotic descriptions is any mention of female genitalia, which can be read as representing Coleridge’s phallic panic in the narration of this poem; the sexual satisfaction of the lesbian couple without phallic assistance is thus avoided. This absence may also be explained by what Faust describes as a ‘ fetichist emphasis’#. As the narrative of the poem is ultimately governed by a male persona, lesbian erotics cannot exist as a valid coital act. They become, instead a ‘ fetich’ in which the object of arousal (the sexual interactions between the females, in this case) ‘ overshadows or replaces genital activity’ – which can be used to explain the focus on parts of the female anatomy that are traditionally sexualised (e. g. the limbs, the breasts) without recognising the genitalia and thus, coital potential. Coleridge frames this encounter within descriptions of mental and physical anguish that typifies heterosexual depictions of lesbian erotics. Christabel’s brain is described as one ‘ of weal and woe’ while Geraldine describes the ‘ mark of [her] shame, this seal of [her] sorrow’. The depiction of lesbians as tortured individuals can be read is several ways. In one way, Geraldine’s description of her shame seems to be indicative of self-revulsion, reflecting the contemporary belief that those who engaged in homosexual activity were forced into a position of self-hatred by their acts and hence had a

tendency to engage is self-harm. This justified male arousal by lesbian activity by punishing them ‘ through invective, denigration, and representations of violence upon her body.’ Furthermore, Geraldine communicates a sense of frustration when she says to Christabel, ‘ vainly though warrest’ – indicative of Christabel’s sexual frustration. This serves to justify lesbian anguish by reiterating the heterosexual assumption that ‘ lesbian loving is only an apprenticeship or foreplay to heterosexual coitus’ #– a coitus that remains exclusively that: heterosexual. Despite the apparent opposition of the representation of female homoerotic activity in these poems, there exist a few similarities between them which can inform the reader’s knowledge of Romantic poetics. Siginificantly, despite the very different treatment of lesbian desire in the poems, both Wordsworth and Coleridge use the natural world as a conceptual framework for their particular representations of female homoerotics. While Wordsworth uses nature as a space in which lesbian desire can be safely articulated, Coleridge employs the image of ‘ the dim forest’ to ‘ purify’ female sexuality and sublimate lesbian desire into explicitly non-erotic friendship. The poems also share the presence of a male persona which overshadows and frames the narratives, a fact that has enormous ironic potential given the lesbian content of these two poems. Although the persona may not explicitly act to negatively impact the representation of female erotics, female homosexuality becomes disempowered and there is an implication that female homosexuality is ‘ less institutionalised, less well-developed, less important or less visible than male homosexuality’ as a result. In contrast to the specifically female content of the previously discussed poetry, Lord

Byron constructs very different representations of male homoerotics in his poems ‘ The Cornelion’ and the ‘ To Eddleston’ (from Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, stanzas 95-96), both describing his relationship with a choirboy, Edleston with ‘ The Cornelion’ being written about ten years before ‘ Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’. The former poem describes Lord Byron’s relationship with Edleston through reference to Greek Love and the Hellenistic tradition. This can be seen through the structure of the exchange, which is made in such a way as to reference Greek pederastic tradition; the use of the term ‘ pledge’ recalls the traditional Athenian approach to pederastic relationships. This contingency is reflected in the lack of focus on explicitly physical or sexual attraction between Byron and Edleston – invoking what Symonds referred to as a ‘ code of honour [which] distinguish[ed] the noble from the baser forms of paiderastia’ #– a socially accepted homogenic love. The only real possibility of an openly sexual encounter between the two occurs (as in Wordsworth) in a pastoral setting where the two men can successfully disentangle themselves from the un-natural expectations of society: ‘ But he, who seeks the flowers of truth/Must quit the garden for the field’. The second poem, composed much later, more clearly ambiguates the pederastic tradition that dominates the interaction between Edleston and Byron in ‘ The Cornelion’. In ‘ To Eddleston’ Byron avoids euphemistic sublimation (such as that which occurs in Wordsworth’s ‘ To lady Eleanor Butler . . .’). This is represented in a shift of titular emphasis; whereas before, the poem focused on a symbol of Hellenistic structure, ‘ To Eddleston’ captures more clearly the personal element of the poem. While the previous poem discussed notions of ‘ friendship’, this poem describes Byron’s lover as being ‘ now,

more than friend’. In contrast to a pederastic power structure, which is characterised by a disparity in desire, the power relationships in ‘ To Eddleston’ deconstructed as agency shifts between the persona and the lover in the poem. The most significant difference, however, is the way in which the boundary between the homoerotic and the homosocial becomes ambiguous through the use of imagery. While this poem does, in some ways reflect notions of ideal love between men it also problematises this ideal through its use of sadomasochistic imagery. The 96th stanza is characterised by the use of violent metaphor. Byron invokes the personification of Death (potentially sexualising Eldleston through the metaphor of an orgasm). He further describes himself as being pierced by arrows – an image that invokes notions of romantic love through the tradition of Eros and sadomasochistic penetration by the phallus in the tradition of Saint Sebastian, thus sexualising the wounded male body. Thus, in what may be viewed as an evolution of the Hellenistic tradition represented in ‘ The Cornelion’, Byron uses ‘ To Eddleston’ to define a new form of male homosexuality along the difference between the sexual practices of his time and the Greek tradition. Unlike the previously discussed poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the representation of homoerotics in this poem is directly informed by the personal experience of a poet who was at least had bisexual tendencies, if not primarily homosexual. Regardless of the exact nature of Byron’s questionable sexuality, the fact remains that the poems are framed by male personae, distinguishing these poems from the heterosexual voyeurism explored in the analysis of the poems dealing with female homoeroticism. This allows Byron to engage with homoerotic material in more sensitive way

and avoid objectifying the point of sexual and indeed, emotional attraction. Moreover, the depictions of male and female homoerotics differ in the way in which they explore Greek homosexual tradition. While Byron denaturalises some elements of Hellenistic homosexuality, he nevertheless relies on a particular version of this mythology to validate and represent his particular version of male homosexuality. In contrast, the women of Romantic poetry are denied access to Sapphic mythology and thus to Greek homosexual tradition; reflecting a cultural strategy that Virginia Woolf would later describe as the ‘ secret language’# of men from which women were by and large excluded. In effect, by simultaneously laying claim to ownership of Greek homoerotic heritage and denying its counterpart to women, the Romantic poets effective construct a ‘ gay consciousness’ (insofar as such a consciousness can be said to exist) that defines the lesbian as the ‘ Other’. ‘[I]f Greece is not “ yours,” you are not “ us”. “ You” are not marginalised in, but rather excluded from, “ our” discourse.’Thus, though Romantic poetry does address the issue of same-sex love, it approaches male and female homosexuality in very different ways. Through the construction of lesbian desire in Coleridge and Wordsworth, the reader is positioned to read the narrative through a decidedly heterosexual discursive framework. Thus, female homoerotics must become either sublimated to a romantic (and desexualised) ideal or degenerate into male voyeurism characterised by ambivalent heterosexual fantasy and phallocentric panic. These disparities in construction are summarised in the way in which the concept of Greek Love is incorporated into the homosexual narratives of Romantic poetry. While Byron’s poetry treats Hellenistic homoeroticism with a certain ambivalence,

it remains important nevertheless to his justification of homosexual tradition and forms an integral element of his construction of homoerotics. Contrastingly, female homoerotics are decontextualised and through the denial of a specifically lesbian tradition, become demonised.