A Grander and Better World: The Many Interpretations of the Rime of the Ancient Mariner

First Runner Up, Humanities

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Since its initial publication in 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has been both condemned and celebrated for its fundamental inscrutability. While many critics have dismissed the ballad as "deranged and incoherent" (Stokes 3), others have endeavored to construct interpretive narratives and decipher Coleridge's intent. In response to the *Rime*'s difficulty, many critics have looked to Coleridge's problematic relationship with Christianity as a key to unlocking meaning within the text. However, the imposition of a positive, concrete, and static Christian framework onto Coleridge's text does violence to its essentially elusive significance. In fact, if one universal theme can be gleaned from the *Rime*, it is the allowance for variable and disparate interpretations of the ballad. Coleridge alludes to this through the dramatization of interpretive disagreement between the three key figures of the text: the Glossator, the Wedding Guest, and the Mariner himself.

Questions of Absolution and Crucifixion in the *Rime*

Russell M. Hillier is a paradigmatic example of a literary scholar who reads *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*as a discussion of Christianity. He understands the ballad to be a reflection of Coleridge's anxiety about the validity of Christ's crucifixion and passive absorption of human sin (10). For Hillier, the Albatross is a Christ figure, representative of this passive sacrifice. He finds evidence of this in Coleridge's reference to the bird's pious observation of vespers, and its partaking of "'food it ne'er had eat'" in the sailors' company (Coleridge qtd. in Hillier 16). Both these moments speak to the Albatross' 'otherness' from the crew, if not otherworldliness. Hillier contends that, by placing the death of the Albatross "off-centre" in the action of the ballad, Coleridge indicates the 'crucifixion' event is a "'lesser, local, negative focus.'" By contrast, the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes is both literally and metaphorically central to the *Rime* (10). From this, he posits that the Mariner's more active atonement reflects Coleridge's preferred conception of Christ and absolution (13).

For further evidence, Hillier looks to Coleridge's theological writings, particularly his comments indicating that we must actively seek God as he reaches out to us. Coleridge writes: "'divine Grace [must be] willed from the human as well as from the divine side'" (Coleridge qtd. in Hillier, 27). However, Hillier's assertion that the Mariner is representative of this active pursuit of 'Grace' is contentious. A careful reading of the *Rime* actually reveals the Mariner's fundamental passivity in the face of the supernatural. An essential aspect of the Mariner's lack of agency is his immobility throughout the ballad. Over the course of the *Rime*, virtually all of the Mariner's motion (or stasis) is prompted by supernatural will in the form of storms, wind, or a becalmed ocean. Before the Mariner has even 'sinned', and begun

his process of atonement (according to Hillier), his ship is forced toward the South Pole by a "tyrannous" storm (Coleridge 42). The language of tyranny is indicative of the Mariner's limited scope for action in this scene.

While incidents of the Mariner's forced motion are numerous, he is also rendered motionless against his will at several points. At the beginning of his adventure, the Mariner's ship is locked in place by the ice of the South Pole (Coleridge 59-60). Later, in the Pacific Ocean, "the ship [is] suddenly becalmed" (Coleridge 570). While the moon and stars continue in their natural motion, the Mariner, in a pathetic contrast, remains in this imposed stasis for many days: "The moving Moon went up the sky… Her beams bemock'd the sultry main" (Coleridge 263-267). It is significant that, several stanzas later, the ocean is depicted as a slave to the moon:

Still as a slave before his lord,

The Ocean hath no blast;

His great bright eye most silently

Up to the Moon is cast. (Coleridge 414-418)

The quotation implies that the Mariner, associated with the sea by virtue of his vocation, is also lacking in agency.

Evidence of the Mariner's passivity is also found in an event that Hillier interprets as an instance of his active pursuit of grace. He claims that the Mariner "strives to redeem the ship's crew from… crisis" by drinking his own blood in order to slake his thirst and cry out that he has sighted the 'spectre-bark' (22). However, the subsequent action of the scene undermines a heroic interpretation of his self-sacrificing behavior. In drinking the blood, the Mariner heralds the spirits who will gamble for control of his fate. When the spectre-bark arrives, the Mariner and the other sailors "listen'd and look'd sideways up," indicating a passive relation to the spirits (Coleridge 203). Furthermore, the Mariner describes his emotional response in the following way: "Fear at my heart, as at a cup,/ My life-blood seem'd to sip" (Coleridge 204-205). Here, the earlier blood image is reinterpreted as evidence of the Mariner's lack of agency. He is being acted upon by fear, rather than engaging in any action himself. Indeed, one can read the plot of the *Rime* as a whole to be a kind of gradual bloodletting. Over the course of his tale, the Mariner is drained of vitality by the tragedies that (passively) befall him, until he is reduced to a pathetic re-enactor of his own history.

Coleridge and Original Sin

Christopher Stokes also questions the moral agency of the Mariner in his exploration of the question of original sin in the *Rime*. He contends that the Mariner's ambiguous move toward atonement reflects Coleridge's theological anxiety surrounding his conversion from Unitarianism to Anglicanism (9). Beginning with the killing of the Albatross, Stokes argues that the fact that "it happens without any apparent foresight or motive" (4) is consistent with the Anglican conception of original sin as

unconscious and intrinsic (11). Furthermore, Stokes claims that the Mariner's move toward atonement is ambiguous, halting, and never fully completed. He finds evidence for this in the moral uncertainty that follows the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes. While Hillier argues this scene constitutes the Mariner's central act of atonement, Stokes notes that his penance is far from complete at this point (7). When his shipmates are reanimated, the Mariner notes "'the curse, with which they died,/ Had never pass'd away'" (Coleridge qtd. in Stokes 8). Stokes also points to the subsequent references to the demonic colour red as evidence a malevolent presence is still with the Mariner after the blessing: "Red light, initially associated with the blood sun, recurs a number of times through the poem as an image of guilt and terror" (8).

Stokes' understanding of the colour red has interesting implications for Coleridge's description of the bride at the beginning of the ballad. Coleridge writes, "The bride hath paced into the hall,/ Red as a rose is she" (33-34). Here, according to Stokes, this penultimate symbol of purity may also carry the scarlet taint of original sin. The suggestion that even the innocent carry within them the seeds of sinfulness occurs once more at the beginning of the *Rime*. From the outset of the Mariner's tale, there are indications he is *predestined* to murder the Albatross. Immediately after setting sail, while the Mariner is still 'innocent,' supernatural forces begin to act on the ship. They sail "Below the kirk, below the hill./ Below the light-house top" (Coleridge 23-24), indicating a movement beyond the influence of the traditional institutions of religion and community.

Subsequently, the crew is set upon by a wind that moves the ship as though they were a man fleeing "the shadow of his foe" (Coleridge 47). This language introduces the possibility of a malevolent, vengeful presence, before the Mariner has even committed his crime. This sentiment is reinforced once they arrive at the South Pole, and the cracking of the ice is described with similar eeriness: "It cracked and growled, and roar'd and howl'd" (Coleridge 61). The fact that the Mariner was forced into his encounter with the Albatross, with allusions to supernatural influence, suggests that he is destined, perhaps compelled, to commit his crime. As his 'punishment' begins before the murder of the Albatross, the Mariner's criminal act seems merely incidental. In Stokes' interpretative framework, the Mariner may be seen as a pawn, merely actualizing the nascent seeds of original sin within him.

The Wedding Guest: A Dramatization of Misinterpretation

As we have seen, Hillier and Stokes, though they argue for very different interpretations of the *Rime*, both claim to express Coleridge's own poetic intentions. David Perkins describes the *Rime*'s allowance for multiple credible theistic interpretations in the following way: "If the poem is pantheist, so also was Coleridge; if Christian, it expresses Coleridge's beliefs; if interpretation must be perspectival, Coleridge knew this and constructed his poem to make this point" (428). Like Perkins, I argue that this attribution of a singular thematic narrative to Coleridge is artificial. A close examination of the poem reveals that Coleridge actually dramatizes interpretive discord within the text, and refrains from indicating which character possesses the 'truth' of the tale. In this way, each interpretation is given credence, and the possibility of a grand poetic narrative is undermined.

As an example, the Wedding Guest has traditionally been understood as a character who systematically misinterprets the Mariner's tale (Pafford 618). However, he can also be seen as a figure who undermines the Mariner's dramatic authority through interruption and misunderstanding. While the Mariner's appearance may resemble to some the prophet "in the Book of Revelation, whose head and hair were white, whose 'eyes were a flame of fire'" (Chandler 403), the Wedding Guest initially refers to him as a "grey-beard loon" (Coleridge 11). This insulting epithet challenges the Mariner's authority on the basis of his alignment with religious authority. The Guest also usurps the Mariner's dominance as a narrator by interrupting the beginning of his tale by beating his breast in protest (Coleridge 31-32).

The Wedding Guest's next interruption prompts the Mariner's confession of his crime. While most scholars emphasize the Mariner's admission, the Guest's outburst bears examination as well. He cries, "'God save thee, ancient Mariner!/ From the fiends that plague thee thus!'" (Coleridge 79-80) His declaration suggests that the Mariner is being unjustly tormented, and requires salvation through God's grace. This contradicts the Mariner's assertion that he "had done a hellish thing" (Coleridge 92) and has been appropriately (and divinely) punished for his crimes. Later, the Guest interjects again when the Mariner informs him that, having been won by Death, all of his shipmates died. The Guest declaims:

I fear thee, ancient Mariner!

I fear thy skinny hand!

And thou art long, and lank and brown,

As is the ribbed sea-sand. (Coleridge 224-228)

While the Mariner assures him that he, being won by Life-in-Death, did not die, the Wedding Guest's misinterpretation is suggestive. He introduces the possibility that the Mariner's curse was never broken, that he still bears the taint of the supernatural and therefore should be feared.

The Glossator: Crime and Punishment

The *Rime*'s gloss also provides an interesting counterpoint to the Mariner's understanding of his experience. Written by Coleridge after the completion of the poem proper, the (imagined) 'editor' and his gloss are often regarded as independently-minded characters standing both within and without the narrative of the *Rime* (Damrosch 567). Many scholars have noted that the gloss introduces traditional notions of morality and crime and punishment to the poem that the Mariner himself does not. Sarah Dyck argues that, "The question of morality thus enters the tale directly not through the Minstrel, the Wedding Guest, or Mariner, but through the editor of the gloss." As evidence, she looks to the fact that the gloss condemns the Mariner for killing the Albatross before his comrades actually come to blame him (Dyck 596). While the crew fluctuates in their conception of the Albatross and its murder, the gloss remains steadfast that it is a "pious bird of good omen" (Coleridge 569). In contrast, the Mariner initially communicates dubiety regarding the bird. He relates that the crew welcomed its arrival "*As if* it had been a Christian soul" [my emphasis] (Coleridge 65). He does not assert that the Albatross actually *is* a Christian.

Other scenes communicate discord between the way events are interpreted by the Mariner and the Glossator. When the Mariner relates how the sailors' bodies are reanimated, he describes the agents of this possession as "a troop of spirits blest" (Coleridge 349). While the invocation of 'blessing' may lead to a Christian interpretation, this is not explicit or obvious in the Mariner's narrative. It is the gloss that feels the need to clarify that the sailors were not possessed "by the souls of men, nor by demons of earth, or middle air, but by a blessed troop of angelic spirits." Furthermore, when the Mariner reveals that the ship is actually being moved by a Polar Spirit, the gloss insists that the spirit is acting "in obedience to the angelic troop" (Coleridge 576). On both these occasions, the Glossator appropriates the Mariner's narrative and manipulates events to conform with Christian ideologies.

This reinterpretation of the Mariner's story culminates in the conclusion of the ballad, in which both the Mariner and the Glossator provide the 'moral' of the tale. According to the Mariner,

He prayeth well, who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast

… For the dear God who loveth us,

He made and loveth all. (Coleridge 612-617)

The language, consistent with the Mariner's style, involves concrete and practical manifestations of an abstract theological concept. The Glossator, perhaps dissatisfied with this message, adds his own: "And to teach by his own example, love and reverence to all things that God made and loveth" (Coleridge 582). The gloss expresses essentially the same sentiment, but in a more abstracted, rational way. While the Wedding Guest undermines the authority of the Mariner through his misinterpretation, or intellectual failure, here, the Glossator weakens the Mariner's power as a narrator through intellectual prowess.

Dyck understands the discrepancies between perspective of the Mariner and that of the Glossator to be a product of a disparity in their emotional distance from the events being discussed in the *Rime*. While "the Mariner has experienced a 'happening' which he is unable to understand and articulate intelligently" (600), the writer of the gloss is removed from these traumatic experiences. Another scholar, in agreement with Dyck, argues that the Mariner is not in possession of knowledge—he is possessed *by* it (Levy 9). At some points in the Mariner's tale, his dramatic, emotive language seems to indicate he is reliving his experience. As he describes the thirst of the crew and the stagnant waters of the becalmed sea, the Mariner appears to be overwhelmed by recollections of his physical suffering: "Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink." By contrast, the Glossator makes the terse remark: "And the Albatross begins to be avenged" (Coleridge 121-122). Similarly, while the Mariner describes the joy of his shipmates at the diminishment of their thirst in some detail, the gloss merely states: "A flash of joy" (Coleridge 571). The Glossator is distant, unmoved by the Mariner's emotions because they are not his own.

However, while the two voices differ in their understanding of the events of the *Rime*, Coleridge hints that the Mariner and the Glossator are not fundamentally opposed. Both figures engage in a poetic reflection on the consistent movement of the firmament in contrast to the Mariner's stasis. The Mariner romantically personifies the Moon's rise in the language of softness and femininity (Coleridge 265-266). Likewise, the gloss imagines the Moon and stars "as lords that are certainly expected" (Coleridge 574). These moments of symmetry suggest that the gloss and the poem proper are intended to complement each other, through a dialogue of discord and agreement. Coleridge allows the variable perspectives to literally coexist side by side within the ballad, thus complicating its meaning.

Conclusion

Coleridge communicates to the reader in several ways the possibility of multiple interpretations of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The outbursts of the Wedding Guest remind us that the Mariner is not an omniscient narrator. He is merely one voice of several within the ballad, subject to the subjectivities and expectations of others. The juxtaposition of the gloss and the text of the poem, with their differing emphasis on religious symbolism, also suggests the validity of a multi-perspectival approach. Furthermore, the Latin aphorism Coleridge uses as preface to the *Rime* declares: "The human mind has always circled around these matters without satisfaction. But I do not doubt that it is beneficial sometimes to contemplate in the mind, as in a picture, the image of a grander and better world" (Burnet qtd. in Damrosch 567). Here, Coleridge indicates that there is value in the simple contemplation of difficult concepts—there is no need to come to definitive conclusions. It is for these reasons that the work of Hillier and Stokes, and the scholars others like them, who make claims to the absolute truth of Coleridge, miss something essential about the *Rime.*

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