

“Beware / Beware”: Coleridgean Surrogacy in Sylvia Plath’s Father Figure Poems

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Abstract

Psycho-biographical readings of Sylvia Plath have dominated scholarly interpretations of her work, especially since her suicide in 1963. However, such readings often fail to recognize the highly imaginative nature of Plath’s work and her influence by Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In response, this article examines the largely unexplored connection between both poets. In a series of poems featuring a father figure, “Electra on Azalea Path,” “The Colossus,” “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” Plath draws on the four-part structure and employment of “surrogate others” that scholar Peter Barry identifies in Coleridge’s “Conversation Poems” (602). When read sequentially and through Coleridge’s structure and surrogacy, Plath’s poems present the narrative of a daughter mourning her father. At times, she lovingly attempts to reconstruct him, while at others times she declares “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (80). Over the course of Plath’s poems it becomes clear that the father is a figure onto whom the daughter projects her oppression and fragmented mind, in a way similar to that of Coleridge’s speaker who projects his appreciation for nature onto others. Thus, Plath drew from more than her own life, using Coleridge as a poetic “father,” to create some of her most highly regarded works.

The Case for Plath's Allusion to Coleridge

In “Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries,” Susan Gubar notes Plath’s “echo[ing]” of the final lines of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (207). In the final lines of “Lady Lazarus,” Plath writes:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (79-84)

165 years earlier, Coleridge brings his fragmentary dream poem to an end with a similar incantation:

. . . Beware! Beware!

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,

And close your eyes with holy dread,

For he on honey-dew hath fed,

And drunk the milk of Paradise. (49-54)

John Beer also notes this haunting echo in “Coleridge, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath: Mythology and Identity” (123), and in “In Yeats’s House: The Death and Resurrection of Sylvia Plath,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest briefly that “Lady Lazarus” is aware of and to some extent based on the metric shifts in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (291). Aside from these and several other brief references, there seems to be little scholarship linking Plath with Coleridge. But in analyzing Coleridge’s conversation poems and a series of Plath’s poems featuring a father figure, it is clear that the connection between the two writers goes beyond a set of parallel lines: their poems are not only structurally similar but are also marked by the use of surrogate others to express the complex thoughts of the speaker.

In “Coleridge the Revisionary,” Peter Barry identifies seven conversation poems: “The Eolian Harp” (1795), “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement” (1796), “To the Rev. George Coleridge” (1797), “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (1797), “Frost at Midnight”

(1798), “Fears in Solitude” (1798), and “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem” (1798). Many critics have grouped these works as “conversation poems,” a term taken from “The Nightingale” and coined by George McLean Harper in 1960, because they are recognized as thematically and structurally similar (Barry 615).¹ For instance, there is always a male speaker, usually meditating on and in nature, who addresses a silent individual. Like other critics, Barry discusses the poems together but redefines their form by arguing that they consistently follow a four-part structure in which they employ a variety of “surrogate self” figures (602). The four stages Barry presents are: a “locatory prelude,” a “meditation [that] then involves a ‘transposition,’” a “self-reproof,” and a “resolution”—a structure that emphasizes Coleridge’s use of surrogacy (602). Read sequentially according to their dates of composition, Plath’s “Electra on Azalea Path” (1959), “The Colossus” (1959), “Daddy” (1962), and “Lady Lazarus” (1962) present the story of a daughter mourning her father using a structure reminiscent of that Barry identifies in Coleridge. In “The Eolian Harp,” the four stages occur as follows: the setting of the poem is described while the poet is engaged in writing (1-12); the transposition happens as the speaker thinks of a wind harp, taking him to an “imaginary setting” where he perceives the harp as an object bringing together all entities (20-48); the speaker is then reproved by his wife, Sara, for his pantheistic thoughts (49-57); leading him to form the resolution to abandon his musings and follow conventional religious beliefs. The subsequent poems, however, show he has failed to keep his resolution as he increasingly expresses his appreciation for nature and projects this feeling onto others present.

Although it is never clear where Plath’s speaker is physically located, she (like Coleridge’s speaker) locates herself in an “imaginary setting” or a mental location to bring attention to her father (Barry 604). In “Electra on Azalea Path,” the speaker locates herself in her childhood to describe her denial of her father’s death. She claims that the day he died she went into a “lightless hibernaculum” (2) where she hibernated for “twenty years / As if [her father] never existed, as if [she] came / God-fathered into the world” (5-7). She continues by meditating on her “innocence” (11), leading to a transposition to her father’s grave, where she “woke” (15) and “found [his] name . . . [his] bones and all” (16). She

realizes her loss and meditates on her father, “borrow[ing] the silts of an old tragedy” (32) as she imagines herself as Electra and describes him “[drinking her] sister’s breath” (29). In the final stanza, she reproves herself for not being able to “age into [her mother’s] state of mind” (40) and accept that her father “died like any man” (39); he died from a gangrene infection. Instead, she views him as an “infamous suicide” (41)—a father who almost wills himself to die. Rather than strive to reach her mother’s state of mind, however, she resolves to continue in her mentality and concludes that her love “did us both to death” (45). Therefore, Plath’s poem closely follows the form of Coleridge’s poems as discussed by Barry, down to the speaker’s failed resolution to change his mindset.

Barry focuses particularly on the moment of reproof by Sara, which he claims signals her as a surrogate—“another person onto whom are projected or transposed key elements of the speaker’s own personality, dilemmas, or thought processes” (602). Barry argues that Sara’s reproving the speaker positions her in a dominant role, effectively putting him in a feminine role (604). The speaker’s feminine position is also evident in his spending the entire poem relaxed and passively indulging in thought. He stretches “my limbs at noon / Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold / The sunbeams dance, like diamonds” (35-7). Sara’s surrogacy allows her to exhibit behavior socially expected of the speaker. Yet Barry argues that Sara’s reproof is not actually her own, but rather that of the speaker, who divides his consciousness by giving another his feelings and thoughts, essentially engaging in a conversation with himself. Barry sees this as reinforced by the fact that “Sara, like all the surrogates in these poems, is silent, and merely has speech and thought attributed to her” (605).

Similarly, the father figure in Plath’s poem is deceased and therefore also silent, and has his daughter’s thoughts and actions attributed to him. Plath’s speaker describes him as an “infamous suicide” and later states that she has her “own blue razor rusting at [her] throat” (42). There is nothing overt in the text to indicate his being a suicide; however, she repeatedly alludes to her own death. She maintains that “the day I died I went into the dirt” (1), “The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill” (15), and “It was my love that did us both to death” (45). Thus, the

speaker reveals her suicidal tendencies by projecting them onto her father. In addition, as in “The Eolian Harp,” the identification of the father as surrogate is heightened by examining the gender dynamics between the speaker and the other. As John Reitz observes in “The Father as Muse in Plath’s Poetry,” the daughter in Plath’s poems reverses the traditional poetic roles of the male as poet and female as muse by “reimaging the muse as male” (420). Coleridge’s speaker defies gender norms by idly meditating, although not entirely successfully as he continues to uphold his conventionally designated role of male poet by focusing on nature, typically regarded as female. Like Coleridge’s speaker, Plath’s daughter tries to refuse the traditional role reserved for her. She makes herself an audible and dominant figure meditating on and recreating her father, while he serves what would traditionally be the daughter’s role as silent subject. She is free to reconstruct him as she wishes, and he is unable to protest her portrayal of him. However, her self-representation is not truly nontraditional as she remains in the sway of patriarchal influence since she has invested in recreating and suppressing him.

Although unable to completely reverse the gender roles that have been established for them, the speakers in both poets’ works project their traditional gender identity onto others present. In the remaining conversation poems that Barry discusses, the surrogates are a “wealthy son of commerce” in “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” George in “To the Reverend,” a group of walkers and Charles in “Lime-Tree Bower,” the speaker’s babe in “Frost at Midnight,” and the “humble man” in “Fears in Solitude.” Finally, in “The Nightingale,” the speaker attributes to six individuals the ideas he has developed in the previous poems. Coleridge’s speaker regards each of these surrogates as different than himself; sometimes, as in the case of Sara, the complete opposite of himself. However, Barry elaborates that each of these individuals’ experience “repeats or corrects, or replaces that of the speaker persona” (610). Despite the speaker’s claims, each surrogate is characterized by the speaker’s own thoughts and actions or symbolizes the speaker’s imagined ideal self. For this reason, the surrogates in Coleridge’s works are usually male.

In Plath's father figure poems, however, the central surrogate is always the father, "Electra on Azalea Path" featuring the only instance in which Plath utilizes a same-sex surrogate. As Barry explains, the surrogates in Coleridge's work serve only as stand-ins for the speaker. However, the main figure in Plath's poems serves as both an entity onto which the daughter projects herself and an external source of oppression that leads her to such projection. In "Electra," the daughter makes clear that she went into a "lightness hibernaculum" (2) for twenty years after her father's death, a time during which she "dream[ed] [his] epic, image by image / Nobody died or withered on that stage" (12). For twenty years, she thought of him as something greater than herself, a god, and never considered him dead. However, she "brought [her] love to bear, and then [he] died" (37)—she freely loved her father and came to realize her loss. For this reason, she closes with "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father— your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death" (43-5). She is fiercely self-critical because, as she sees it, it was in her moment of love that she killed her father by finally coming to an awareness of him as dead. This leads her to experience emotional death and a desire to physically annihilate herself. Although twice in the poem she says she loves her father, her inability to view his death as anything other than an "infamous suicide" reveals not only her projection of suicidal feelings but also her transferring of blame to her father. By believing he is a suicide, she makes him the culprit of his own death, as well as someone who chose to abandon her. Thus, her projection serves as a mechanism through which she can cope with her guilt and loss by making her father an antagonist.

While it can be argued that figures like Sara in Coleridge's work are also beings who function independently of the speaker, their sole purpose in the poems is to enable a dialogue between the speaker and himself. In most of the conversation poems, this self-dialogue is a device through which the speaker can sort out something about himself, usually feelings and thoughts regarding some aspect of nature that is in no way connected to the surrogates. Therefore, the speaker could very well meditate on his emotions without the stand-ins, but chooses to reflect himself onto them to reach a resolution. In Plath's poems, this same self-dialogue is present but directly regards the daughter's feelings toward the central surrogate,

the father. Thus, he is a strong and not interchangeable entity as he plays both the role that surrogates and nature occupy in Coleridge's work.

The only case in which Plath employs a same-sex surrogate solely to project the speaker's views occurs toward the middle of "Electra," which mentions the speaker's sister whose father "drank" her breath (29). Throughout this and subsequent poems, the speaker increasingly articulates her oppression by her father. Therefore, her father's drinking her sister's breath is the speaker's projection of her own situation. Furthermore, although the surrogacy argument presented here is grounded specifically in the text, taking Plath's biography briefly into consideration strongly supports the sister as a surrogate because Plath had no sisters. The sister is mentioned only when Plath imagines herself as Electra, further suggesting that the sister mentioned is an imagined person onto whom she projects herself. Ultimately, despite the father's role as both surrogate and independent force, the surrogacy in Plath's father figure poems is complicated and increased as the speakers' attitudes change, a progress also discernible in Coleridge's conversation poems.

Surrogacy in Plath's Poetry

In Plath's "The Colossus," the daughter describes her father as a towering God-like statue she has actively labored to get "put back together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed" (1-2) for "thirty years" (8). Her father's ghostly image stands over her as a tall patriarchal figure. However, he is broken at the same time that she has been in such a state of oppression leading her to attempt to piece him back together. She continues to meditate on her father who is, again, notably unable to speak. In this poem though, just as with Coleridge's surrogates, the father figure has speech attributed to him. In both Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and "The Nightingale," for example, the speaker describes his babe as incapable of "articulate sound," but some form of communication nonetheless ("The Nightingale" 91). Similarly, the father is described as speaking incomprehensible "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles" (5). Despite this, she imagines that "perhaps [her father] consider[s himself] an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other" (6-7). For this reason, the speaker tries to "dredge the silt from

[his] throat" (9). She continues by describing his "skull plates" (14), the "white tumuli of [his] eyes" (15), and his "acanthine hair" (20), which leads to her transposition to "the Roman Forum" as she thinks of what a "pithy and historical" figure her father is (18). As she keeps meditating she reproves herself, realizing that she is unable to fix her father because "it would take more than a lighting-stroke / To create such a ruin" (22-3). Ultimately she resolves to abandon her project.

In this poem, the speaker's attitude toward her father is different. She calmly and devoutly works to put him back together—she is employing another approach to deal with her loss and reconstruct her father. However, her attempts to reconstruct him also expose him as a surrogate as he is a physical manifestation of her own fragmented mind and identity. Although it seems that she has finally put her father to rest, his inability to express himself as a human is in fact the speaker's own inability. While she occupies a dominant role as poet and constructor of her father, her shift of emotions from "Electra on Azalea Path" to "The Colossus" suggests that her speech is the "Mule-bray, pig grunt and bawdy cackles" attributed to her father. While she speaks intelligibly, she has hitherto failed to express her feelings in full because her language amounts to garble; her words over these first two poems are fickle and fail to communicate a unified meaning. Moreover, as Reitz notes, her explanation that something "more than a lighting-stroke" (21) was required to "create such a ruin" (22) "hints at the immense power of the unexpressed rage that disordered her image of him" (Reitz 425).² Her knowledge of the force it would take to distort her father suggests that she has not released the anger she suggests in "Electra."

This suggested anger finds full voice in "Daddy," where the daughter releases all of her rage and reveals herself as the broken figure represented by the father-statue. The opening lines of "Daddy" are particularly strong and commanding: "You do not do, you do not do / anymore black shoe" in which she has resided for "thirty years" hardly "daring to breathe" (1-2, 4, 5). The speaker locates herself in her father's figurative suffocating shoe, but proclaims that she is no longer oppressed by him. As in "Electra" and "The Colossus," she meditates on her father and describes him as a god-like figure, "marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal" (8-10).

However, this father-statue has his “head in the freakish Atlantic” where she “used to pray to recover [him]” as in “The Colossus” (11, 14). Thus, she overturns his image, claims her dominance over him, and finally acknowledges her broken state as she thinks about the restrictions and repression she has dealt with because of her father. She continues meditating on her father, regarding him as a Nazi, “Panzer-man” (45), “swastika” (46), “Fascist” (48), “brute” (50), “devil” (54), and “bastard” (80). She discloses that she “was ten when they buried [him]” (57) and admits that “at twenty [she] tried to die / And get back, back, back to [him]” (58-9). Her suicide attempt fails and she goes on to act upon her Electra impulse as described in “Electra on Azalea Path” by marrying someone like him, a “vampire who said he was [her father]” (72). However, she reproves herself for having done so and for having loved her father. She resolves to kill his haunting image by driving a “stake in [his] fat black heart” (76) and declares “Daddy, daddy, you bastard I’m through” (80).

The language and intensity of this poem is markedly different from that in the previous two poems in which the speaker focuses on her actions and expresses both feelings of love and hatred for her father. In “Electra,” she admits to “dreaming [his] epic, image by image,” while at the same time accusing him of committing suicide and then admitting that she was in part to blame for his death (12). Similarly, in “The Colossus,” while the speaker is very tranquil and mourns her father, she shares her knowledge that a stronger force than lighting could cause his ruin. This information coupled with the fact that she repeatedly states that she will no longer try to piece him together suggests her hidden desire to be that force. In “Daddy,” she continues to acknowledge the way in which she acted after her father’s death; however, her energy and primary concern is focused on her own at this point unrestrained emotions. Her speech is no longer incomprehensible or inconsistent, but instead is driven by her determination to figuratively kill him. She is able to articulate the damaging effects her father had on her, and she acknowledges that although she loved him she has “always been scared of [him]” (41). However, neither the love nor fear she felt keeps her from clearly and directly expressing her hatred for him as she transforms her father from a God to an oppressive Nazi-devil. Moreover, rather than

identifying with her father as she does in “Electra,” she distinguishes herself as his opposite. For instance, while she identifies him as a Nazi whose “language [is] obscene” (35), she calls herself “a bit of a Jew” (45).³

Although the daughter is finally able to communicate her unrelenting rage toward her father, the surrogacy of Coleridge’s conversation poems manifests itself most clearly in this poem than in any other. In Coleridge’s “The Nightingale,” for example, the speaker ends by sharing his glorification of nature, making the other nature-admirers in his poems obvious representatives of the speaker. Similarly, the daughter in “Daddy” shares information about herself that makes the actions she attributes to her father recognizable as her own. While the daughter attempts to present herself as a person extremely different from her father, he proves to be her surrogate when she relates her suicide attempts:

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue. (58-62)

Not her father but she is the suicide in “Electra in Azalea Plath.” Moreover, her description of being forced out of a sack—a body bag or womb—and being put “together with glue” (62), is undeniably similar to her attempt to “put [her father] back together entirely / Pieced, glued” in “The Colossus” (1-2). In addition, just like her colossal father, she has had difficulty speaking because her “tongue [was] stuck in [her] jaw” and “in a barbed wire snare” (25-6). Her attempts at speech have been like her father’s barnyard clatter; in a language that she considers not her own. She stutters “Ich, ich, ich, ich” in her Nazi-father’s German (27). She suggests feeling both love and hatred before, further rendering her language confused and meaningless. This can also be seen when she describes marrying a man just like her father, a “vampire” whom she twins with her father as Coleridge twins the Wordsworths in “The Nightingale.”

It is worth noting though, that just as Coleridge's speaker in "Dejection: An Ode" claims he cannot write, Plath's speaker has been unable to speak sensibly in previous poems and in "Daddy" claims she cannot speak. However, despite making such statements both speakers prove able. "Dejection" is a work that Barry references and that other critics have identified as a conversation poem, and another in which the speaker meditates on nature. The speaker perceives nature but cannot gain inspiration or feeling from its "outward forms" (45), and instead recognizes that "fountains are within" (46). Throughout the poem he conveys his frustration and inability to feel and knows he must look within himself. Nevertheless, in stating he lacks words he is communicating about that very subject. Likewise, all along the daughter has been thinking about her father and feeling that she lacks speech, not recognizing her own ability. Before, she had not overtly expressed her emotions. That changes with "Daddy," however, as anger is the feeling she finds within herself that serves as her new way of coping with her grief.

The speaker's rage is also another indicator of her father as surrogate. As Laura Frost writes in "'Every Woman Adores a Fascist': Feminist Visions of Fascism from *Three Guineas* to *Fear of Flying*," "the speaker of 'Daddy' recapitulates [her father's] violence . . . her punishment of 'Daddy' shows her own identification with his Nazi cruelty rather than an overcoming of it" (52). Although she does not use the term, her comment implies surrogacy as the speaker proves to be no different than the father. She criticizes him for being an oppressor and then positions herself as one. As the final lines of all of the poems suggest, she is motivated by her desire to overcome her pain and release him. Her closing statement also strongly conveys surrogacy, as "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" can be interpreted as either the speaker finally killing the memory of her father or her admission that she is the one who is dead (80). With this double-meaning line, although the daughter establishes her hatred for her father, she anticipates what is seen clearly in "Lady Lazarus"—the fusing of the speaker and other.

In the final lines of "The Colossus" and "Daddy," the speaker has claimed to put her father to rest, but in "Lady Lazarus" she once again addresses him, this time with startling results. In "Lady Lazarus" the

speaker does not specify her locale. Instead, she begins with a confession of something she does “one year in every ten”—attempt to commit suicide (2). In contrast to the other poems, her meditation in this work is on herself. She has survived death (that is, she has been resuscitated again) and she therefore puts her body on display. She describes herself with a featureless face like “Jew linen” (8) and “eye pits” (13), and claims that she has “nine times to die. // This is Number Three” (21-2). Then she transposes to a theatrical setting where there is a “peanut-crunching crowd” (26) waiting to see her “big strip tease” (29). She exposes her body and charges for “the eyeing of [her] scars” (58) and articles such as “a piece of [her] hair or [her] clothes” (64). She reprimands herself, however, for not being able successfully to commit suicide as she hates the “theatrical / comeback in broad day / to the same place, the same face, the same brute” (51-3). But despite her failure, she explains that she is dead-in-life: “Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there” (73-5).⁴ Finally, she ends with a warning to “Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware” (79-81), and resolves to “rise with [her] red hair” and “eat men like air” (84).

In “Lady Lazarus” the speaker has undergone a drastic change. In a first reading, the father’s presence in the poem does not appear strong. However, upon closer reading he can be recognized, for instance, in her assertion that the worst part of being resuscitated is having to return to “the same place, the same face, the same brute” (53). Although, at that instant, she refers to the people who revive her, this can also be read as referring to her father. “The first time it [her suicide] happened I was ten,” the speaker says, “It was an accident” (34-5); when reading the poems in sequence, this would refer to her going “into the dirt” in the first line of “Electra.” The second time she, according to “Daddy,” attempts to commit suicide at the age of twenty, “they pulled [her] out of the sack” (61). Both times, however, the speaker returns to the same figurative place and face—to her father whom, in “Daddy,” she refers to as a “brute” (50). In reading which men she threatens in “Lady Lazarus,” it becomes clear that they are mere representatives of her father. She refers to “Herr God” and “Herr Lucifer,” both identities she has placed on her father in previous poems, and which she appropriates for herself in “Lady Lazarus.”

Coleridge's speaker keeps his distance from the surrogate others; he projects himself onto them but does not entirely merge his identity with them. Plath goes a step further: in "Lady Lazarus," the speaker has invaded the self she had previously reserved for her father. Although she differentiates herself from her father, her "eye pits" (13) resemble the "white tumuli of [his] eyes" in line 15 of "The Colossus." In addition, she assumes his identity as both a god and devil. As Frederick Buell puts it in "Sylvia Plath's Traditionalism," the speaker "image[s] herself as [a] destructively powerful phoenix-witch-bitch-goddess" (203). In repeatedly attempting to kill herself and surviving, she is like a goddess—immortal. At the same time, her return is haunting, her body horrific—with skin "peel[ing] off like a napkin," covered with scars, and eyes gouged out (10). She is the star in a theatrical performance exposing her seemingly death-proof body, thus becoming the "infamous suicide" that she makes her father in other poems (41). Finally, her resolution to "eat men like air" makes her a terrorizing figure like her father who bit her heart and "drank my sister's breath" ("Electra" 29; "Daddy" 56). In reading Plath's father figure poems through the stages and surrogacy that Barry lays out, it is apparent that she has undergone a drastic transformation from innocent and helpless daughter to someone almost indistinguishable from her father-surrogate.

Sealing the Deal with "Kubla Khan"

Although "Kubla Khan" is clearly not one of Coleridge's conversation poems, the ending of the poem offers an instance of surrogacy that is strikingly similar to that of Plath. It begins with a locatory prelude in Xanadu near the palace of Mongol emperor, Kubla Khan. The speaker focuses on a "deep romantic chasm," which he considers enchanted, as if haunted by a "woman wailing for her demon-lover" (12, 16). He makes one last observation: the palace's shadow on the waves creating a "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice" (36). From this, he is transposed to a vision he had of a damsel with a dulcimer, an Abyssinian maid "singing of Mount Abora" (41). He posits that if he could "revive within [himself] . . . / Her symphony and song," he would build with such music "that sunny dome! Those caves of ice!" in air (42-3, 47). He

imagines that all who saw him would be terrified, crying “Beware” (49) of “his flashing eyes, his floating hair” (52).

When compared to the conversation poems, “Kubla Khan” is not as internally focused and does not invite a reading of the speaker projected onto another. The distant power of the Khan does not enable self-dialogue or reflect the speaker. However, the speaker appropriates the Abyssinian maid’s female appearance and recreates her with frightening eyes and hair, thus making him her surrogate. Rather than she reviving some part of him, he embodies the negativity he associates with her femininity. In this manner, he becomes like the “woman wailing for her demon-lover” he mentions in line 16. He brings the Abyssinian maid to life as a haunting female figure. In a parallel move, Plath’s speaker revives her father by imagining herself as a dead female Lazarus who adopts his oppressive patriarchal power.

Considering the stages and surrogacy Barry describes in the conversation poems, and looking more specifically at Plath’s father figure poems and “Kubla Khan,” it is evident that Plath and Coleridge are strongly connected. The ways in which Plath’s speakers in “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” and Coleridge’s speaker in “Kubla Khan” negatively recreate and revive another of the opposite sex are closely aligned. The disturbing moment of surrogacy in both Plath’s and Coleridge’s work is, moreover, located in a final section of their respective poems. However, while Coleridge presents himself as the wailing woman and Abyssinian maid through an imagined scenario, Plath’s daughter becomes her demonic father. In addition, the “woman wailing for her demon-lover” curiously describes Plath’s speaker who angrily regards her father, likening him to the devil after marrying someone like him, and strongly suggests that Coleridge’s work was a source of inspiration for hers.

Endnotes

1. Barry’s article is one of many attempts to define exactly which works are conversation poems and what the nature of their similarity is. For more discussion on these works see G.S. Morris’s “Sound, Silence, and Voice in Meditation: Coleridge, Berkeley, and the Conversation Poems” and Frederick Burwick’s “Rethinking the Thinker.”

2. Although the current study looks specifically at Coleridge, the descriptions of the statue and ruin in “The Colossus” present the possibility of other Romantic echoes. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” for instance, famously describes a “Colossal Wreck”

with “frown” and “wrinkled lip,” a frightening despot whose power has been turned to dust and sand (13, 4, 5).

3. The appropriateness of Plath’s Shoah imagery has been a central topic in Plath scholarship. Critics such as Jacqueline Rose and James Fenton justify the references while others like Brian Murdoch, Leon Wieseltier, and George Steiner do not. Other scholars such as Susan Gubar believe that the function of the images regardless of appropriateness must be the focus.

4. Recognizing the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” as dead-in-life offers another parallel to Coleridge’s poetry, specifically *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. While an examination of Plath’s possible allusions to this poem is beyond the scope of this paper, *The Ancient Mariner* nevertheless features a haunted and haunting sailor condemned to retell his tragic tale after the nightmare female figure “Life-in-Death . . . / Who thickens man’s blood with cold” (193-2) wins him in a game of dice played against Death, “her mate” (189).

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