


Spring 4-24-2018

# Satyrs, Syphilis, and Sailors: The Influence of Gaius Petronius' Satyricon Liber on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Spencer Fugate

Macalester College, shafugate@gmail.com

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## Recommended Citation

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**Satyrs, Syphilis, and Sailors:  
The Influence of Gaius Petronius' *Satyricon Liber* on Samuel Taylor  
Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"**

Spencer Fugate

Advisor: Taylor Schey

April 25, 2018

### Abstract

For generations, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" has befuddled readers. This project argues that many of its apparent puzzles disappear once we recognize its base text as the *Satyricon Liber*, Gaius Petronius' first-century vulgar comedy. Attending to Coleridge's broader literary corpus alongside images of sexual dysfunction in "The Rime" itself to justify this foundational claim, I then explore how a comic source transforms the reader's experience of "The Rime" and its criticism. "The Rime" refutes cohesive readings as a horror-poem because it was never intended as pure horror: rather, the poem is Coleridge's attempt to modernize a classic, low-browed farce.

### Acknowledgements

First and foremost, this paper owes its existence, completion and polish to the extraordinary Taylor Schey: without him, this project would have shriveled and died in its infancy. Someday, I swear, I'll send him a draft of something with proper comma placement. Wessam El-Meligi and Ben Voigt also deserve special recognition in agreeing to be my [eleventh hour] readers, providing invaluable feedback and charming conversation during this project's defense. Finally, a thanks to Nanette Goldman for fostering the original love of literatures both classical and modern which originally begot this project.

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## Introduction

“Like the hero’s glittering eye, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* continues to exercise a spell on its readers, luring each generation of critics towards attempting new interpretations,”<sup>1</sup> claims Anca Vlasopolos. Only partially, I believe, are these critics drawn to “The Rime” by the Mariner’s “glittering eye” or some inherent charm in any of his actual rhymes, however. Rather, the majority of critics are seduced by the poem’s remarkable pliability: with a fragmentary plot and an unreliable narrator, with widely divergent versions and almost-useless authorial commentary, “The Rime” rarely refutes either readings or readers. This willingness to nurture any and all of the reader’s inclinations and desires for what “The Rime” might “truly” mean makes any endeavor to critique “The Rime” both the critic’s *Paradisio* and their *Inferno*: the amorphous “Rime” supports any case for meaning the critic might make and invariably also supports its rebuttal, begging the question of whether any of these generations of interpretations have much utility at all. “The Rime” itself is a work without any apparent telos: a critic’s sleuthing of meaning in the presented tale of “The Rime” is fundamentally an attempt to ascribe a telos to the text. The two centuries of internecine conflict over the meaning of “The Rime” suggests that no satisfactory telos of “The Rime” has yet been found.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anca Vlasopolos, “‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ as Romantic Quest,” 365.

<sup>2</sup> Paul H. Fry’s critical edition of the “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” proffers something of a physical manifestation of these scholarly conflicts in setting five schools of critique: reader response, Marxist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist and new historical, side-by-side to accompany Coleridge’s poem.

I, also having been ensnared by “The Rime,” find this vast and echoing waste land of its critique distressing. In lieu of embarking upon another self-defeating attempt to descry some ultimate revelatory meaning in “The Rime,” I’ll explore certain aspects of its literary, cultural, and classical foundations. While this gesture in “Rime” scholarship is by no means uncommon,<sup>3</sup> the foundational texts which are traditionally read alongside the “Rime” follow Coleridge’s marginal glosser of the 1817 edition of the poem in seeking mainly theological meanings of and companions to “The Rime.” Since theology is one of the most muddied aspects of the original “Rime,” these theological readings have fallen into the same ruts as the rest of the critiques of “The Rime.”

An aspect of “The Rime” that is not as muddied, however, is its fixation upon and wielding of images of sexual dysfunction throughout the Mariner’s journey. Originally intrigued by Coleridge’s use of syphilitic imagery in his figuring of the Nightmare Life-in-Death, I cast about for a foundational text of sexual dysfunction to read alongside “The Rime,” hoping to understand a bit of Coleridge’s intention for this unexpected sexuality in “The Rime” through its literary ancestry. In the *Satyricon Liber* of Petronius, a first-century Latin sexcapade and homoerotic caper, I found more than a foundation for Coleridge’s use of syphilis in the text: many of the characters, actions, and fixations of “The Rime” are direct transmissions of Petronius’ romps into the madcap world of the

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<sup>3</sup> The most famous example being Robert Warren Penn’s “A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading,” describing “The Rime” as the Mariner’s redemptive quest to discover the “joy of human communion in God” (78).

Mariner. Even the aspects of “The Rime” that are most fragmentary are evocative of the specific lacunae of Petronius’ only partially transmitted text.

Reading “The Rime” alongside Petronius achieved the remarkable: rather than simply unearthing a few new classical motifs or images, I found that “The Rime,” even in its multiple iterations, can be read both coherently and cohesively. In the following five sections—named for *Satyricon* characters associated with each sections’ primary theme—I endeavor to justify reading Petronius as the base-text for “The Rime” through both “The Rime” itself and Coleridge’s much larger corpus, and then explore how this louche, comic source transforms our understanding of Coleridge’s superficially horrific poem. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” has troubled the sight of critics for two centuries precisely because it seemingly refuses any internal cohesion: Petronius, however, provides a cohesive foundation for “The Rime,” making sensible the production of the senseless journey of the Mariner.



### I. Quartilla<sup>4</sup>

But such a claim is for now premature. Beginning with my beginning, we'll first treat syphilis and other sexual explicit disruptions in "The Rime." Whereas scholars such as James Holt McGavarn discuss themes of overt sexual desire in "The Rime," they tend to fixate upon quirks of language that could allude to either targeted sexual arousal or a physical sexual act. According to McGavarn, "shooting a bird' had sexual, and possibly homosexual, connotations in Coleridge's time [which offers] another way of confirming that this is a poem about an assault or rape whether real or imagined, about a fall, about suffering, about an at least partial awakening to terrible self-knowledge."<sup>5</sup> The Albatross' standing in the text is thus reduced to only that which is to be shot. However, to interpret only the actions of the poem is to ignore the aspects of "The Rime" that are necessarily actionless. The interruptions and complications of sexual activity dominate a far larger portion of the sexual imagery of the "The Rime" than those of sexual fulfillment.

Sexual interruption is also one of the few themes that coexists in both the poem's frame and inset-narrative, though the interruption is somewhat obfuscated in the frame. The second stanza of the poem provides what, at its onset, appears to be a relatively trite depiction of the festivities that the Mariner is

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<sup>4</sup> The priestess of Priapus in the *Satyricon*: she oversees an orgy involving the protagonists of the work in which a precept of Priapus is violated. She then transmits his curse of impotence to the men: here, she is figured as a corollary to the Nightmare Life-in-Death, the apparent arbiter of the Mariner's curse.

<sup>5</sup> James Holt McGavarn, "Glossing Over the Ancient Mariner: Perversion, Panic, and Collage-Texts," 163.

preventing the Wedding-Guest from attending: “The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,/ And I am next of kin;/ The guests are met, the feast is set:/ May'st hear the merry din” (5-8). A few stanzas later, this seemingly stock depiction of a wedding's gaiety continues as the hall's bassoon interrupts the Mariner's tale and the frame-narrator informs us that “The bride hath paced into the hall, /Red as a rose is she; /Nodding their heads before her goes/ The merry minstrelsy” (33-36). Together, however, these two stanzas inform us of a remarkable disruption of a traditional marriage ceremony when we consider the ceremony is proceeding without the Bridegroom's “next-of-kin”: marriages that can claim a hall and a “merry minstrelsy” are not common-law marriages ceremonies in the peasant hovels of England. The marriage that the Mariner interrupts is one with members of an upper-class and likely is invested with the familial, financial, and dynastic concerns attendant to such an alliance. Through the Mariner's interference, the “next of kin” who is the physical representation of those political concerns is prevented from attending the ceremony; thus, in some ways, the Mariner's subverts the very foundation that likely begot the marriage itself and precludes its “perfection.” No matter the beauty of the Bride or the merriness of the festivities, the Mariner has corrupted the ceremony. When the Wedding-guest “Turn'd from the Bridegroom's door,” (565) that corruption is complete.

Coleridge's corruption of the ceremony manifests in another, more subtle way. Not only does Coleridge turn away the presumed primary beneficiary from the wedding itself with his Mariner; he also corrupts the fleeting image of the

Bride herself. Coleridge's only description of the Bride, the "Red as a rose," originally seems to be an assertion that the wedding, sans its rhyming interrupter, is an otherwise picturesque event, roses being a clichéd simile of beauty across cultures<sup>6</sup>. However, as the poem progresses, rufescent women in particular are corrupted, implying that even the most seemingly desirable union of men and women is somehow tainted. We'll treat the poem's disruption of heterosexual relations in more depth in a later section, but first we'll explore how redness is corrupted within the poem itself.

The most obvious contrast to the beautiful rose of the bride is the other feminine figure of the poem, the Night-mare Life-in-Death. When the Mariner sights the phantom ship manned only by Death and his Night-mare mate, the first detail the narrator can discern of these figures is that "Her lips were red" (190). However, Coleridge does not leave us with only her rosy lips, but continues the description: "her looks were free,/ Her locks were yellow as gold:/ Her skin was as white as leprosy,/ The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,/ Who thickens man's blood with cold" (190-195).

Debbie Lee contends that the "mariner's implied nationality and the wedding guest's response to his 'long, and lank, and brown' (226) body links him to British sailors who had been yellow fever victims."<sup>7</sup> In Lee's compelling analysis, the exploration of the Mariner's physical withering marks and implicates

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. Song of Songs 2.

<sup>7</sup> Debbie Lee, "Yellow Fever and the Slave Trade: Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" 681.

him within a national and geo-political narrative of a slave-trade associated disease. If we extend Lee's technique of reading the body to the Night-mare Life-in-Death, we are confronted with a very different, though nonetheless potent disease: syphilis. Licensed by Coleridge's "white as leprosy" comparison to read disease into the Night-mare, we then may return the "free-looks" with which she was introduced—or glance ahead at the gambling that shall conclude her role in the narrative—and be led to a disease associated with the sexually free and the dissolute. Her companionship with "Death" too should raise our brows as we think of the "little death" that figured sexual climax.

However, the most convincing linkage between syphilis and Life-in-death is her effect of cooling the blood of the men she encounters. According to J. Johnston Abraham, as early as the turn of the sixteenth century there were treatments of syphilis that prescribed that a patient be "kept in bed in one room at a high temperature, and heavily clothed to produce sweating... for twenty to thirty days."<sup>8</sup> If the destruction of syphilis was associated with sweat and heat, then the disease in its active state was associated with the chills and freezes that the Night-mare Life-in-Death produces in men. And if we then consider that red-pock marks are the somatic manifestation of the venereal disease, then we can see that this correlated figure with the ruby Bride disrupts the positivity of her redness.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Johnston Abraham, "Some Account of the History of the Treatment of Syphilis," 2.

Of course, the Night-mare Life-in-Death serves a far more prominent role in the poem than just an auxiliary to the quick-passing Bride, and thus this syphilitic parallel deserves a more thorough exploration of how it colors the Mariner's narrative. Superficially, we need not look much farther than the madness of the Mariner himself: while Coleridge spends some six-hundred lines complicating the figure of the Mariner, the Wedding-guest's initial impression of the Mariner as a "grey-beard loon" (11) is never an impression wholly dismissed within the poem. From Aphra Behn's 1684 "A Letter to a Brother of the Pen in Tribulation"<sup>9</sup> to William Hogarth's 1735 engraving *A Rake's Progress*, English literature proves no stranger to progressions from syphilis to madness. While this is not to suggest that the narrative of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is nothing more than a pox-induced dream, it is to broach the question as to why the figure that "winneth the ancient Mariner" is drawn from stock depictions of a venereal disease.

But just as Debbie Lee explores the greater cultural terrors and concerns surrounding Yellow Fever, we too can engage the zeitgeist of syphilis in the Romantic era to develop hypotheses for the disease's inclusion. As Hogarth's aforementioned plate-series were widely popular in the England of the generations preceding Coleridge, a close reading of the plates can provide a

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<sup>9</sup> A choice section from Behn's poem, "Pox on't that you must needs be fooling now/Just when the wits had greatest need of you./ Was Summer then so long a coming on,/That you must make an Artificial one?" captures both Syphilis' association with the discussion of heat just concluded and introduces the treatment of lost "wits" now forthcoming.

cultural conception of a disease that rarely encouraged frank discourse in the public sphere.



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While the associated texts of the *Progress* remain laconic in regard to the nature of the Rake's disease and resultant madness, there is no question that syphilis is that which leads the Rake to Bedlam. Far more intriguing than this depiction of syphilis, however, is the prominence of the figure of Sarah Good, a repudiated former lover and common-law wife of the Rake. Sarah, though betrayed and abandoned by the Rake, refuses to abandon the Rake even as his fortunes fall, disease strikes, and Bedlam eventually claims him. Hogarth concludes the accompanying text of his series not with a description of the Rake's pangs but

<sup>10</sup>These images are both provided by the New York Public Library, taken from the following digital locations: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "ARake's Progress, Plate 2d [Prosperity, (with Horlot's smiles...]" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/522d1b10-b504-0130-79c2-58d385a7bbd0> and The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "ARake's Progress, [Plate 8; Madness...]" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/c93b7f70-b50b-0130-1413-58d385a7bbd0>

with “The ever faithful Sarah Young sits, weeping, by [the Rake’s] side,”<sup>11</sup> centering the tragedy of the Rake not on how he suffers but on how he causes suffering. And given that over the course of the plates Sarah is portrayed with a sympathy that Hogarth does not extend towards the Rake or any of his raucous compatriots, and that Sarah is revealed to have borne the Rake’s child, then that suffering is unequivocally directed at the domestic unit. Syphilis, in this regard, becomes both the wage and the punishment for the Rake for his dissipation, but also the mechanism through which that dissipation’s wages are disseminated to the innocent and adjacent in society without a potential for redemption. Syphilis, in Hogarth’s view, is the ultimate condemnation that sinks the family as well as the afflicted.

Similarly, our infected and condemned Mariner becomes a disrupter of domestic spheres. Not only is the interruption of a wedding the introduction of the “Rime”; we return to it for the poem’s conclusion: “now the Wedding-Guest/  
Turn’d from the bridegroom’s door./ He went like one that hath been stunn’d,/ And is of sense forlorn: / A sadder and a wiser man/ He rose the morrow morn” (621-626). To be sure, we could read the closing moments of the poem as nothing more than the mechanical manifestations of a desire to match the ending of a story with its beginning, or as a simple attempt to give closure to the frame of the poem. However, if the decision to close with the Wedding-guest’s reverie was nothing more than rote-adherence to the conventions of a narrative, it would be

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<sup>11</sup> The description of the scene is taken Sir John Soane’s Museum of London’s website.

not only the final capitulation to narrative convention in the poem; it would also be the first. As William Wordsworth comments:

The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of the Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the controul (sic) of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated.<sup>12</sup>

“The Rime” represents a fundamental violation of established narratives and praxes of storytelling. And while Coleridge’s decentering of the main character can certainly be seen as a twist to the standard structure of narratives, it is Wordsworth’s third quibble that reveals something remarkable about “The Rime”: namely, that Coleridge eschews the laws of probability and cause-and-effect, two of the primary facets of what Ian Watt describes as “modern realism”<sup>13</sup> in *The Rise of the Novel*. While Watt’s focus in *The Rise of the Novel* is, of course, not poetry, Watt reveals a fundamental shift in the English conception of a narrative throughout the eighteenth century and that shift is one “The Rime” does not acknowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems*, note to pg. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 11



That dismissal of the modern standards of narrative is not one that Coleridge undertakes without intention. With the prolific archaisms that decorate even the title of the original version of the poem—"The Ancyent Marinere"—Coleridge makes explicit that his "Rime" is intended to be an artifact. Narrative is simply one more facet with which Coleridge sets his tale against convention.

"The Rime" is fashioned as an episodic tale of an earlier generation such as the *Rake's Progress*. Just as Sarah Good is the source of pathos in Hogarth's tale, so too is the Wedding-guest our lens through which to read the suffering of the Mariner. And just as Sarah Good is disrupted by the syphilis of another, so too is the Wedding-guest denied domestic happiness due to the syphilis of another. But I will not here claim that "The Rime" is Coleridge's esoteric attempt at recreating Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* or a morality play with any of the genre's necessitated clarity; far from it. Where Hogarth's depiction of a young rake is a cautionary tale about the depredations of syphilis and its abilities to destroy heart, hearth, and mind, Coleridge's "Rime" fails miserably as a moral tale because it obfuscates any potential moral reading. Rather, the question is why this ostensibly sexless poem is seemingly reliant upon a venereal disease for the circumstances of its transmission.

## II. Trimalchio<sup>14</sup>

If we now turn to a figure in “The Rime” who is vocationally defined by an ostensible abstinence from sex, the Hermit, we can see how Coleridge sows an odd sensuality even in the least apparently fertile grounds of the poem. A.W. Crawford makes the claim that the Hermit “alone could render any Spiritual assistance”<sup>15</sup> to the Mariner because he serves as “Nature’s High Priest.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, while such a reading of the Hermit does accord with the self-evident natural theology that the Mariner himself provides in the epilogue of the tale—“He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things both great and small;/ For the dear God who loveth us,/ He made and loveth all” (614-618)—this reading requires both that the Mariner’s assertion is an accurate and ultimate “truth” to the poem and that the Hermit himself could claim responsibility for any spiritual absolution. Neither requirement is met without complications in the poem. The Mariner’s ability to interpret accurately his own experience becomes doubtful the moment he claims to the Bridegroom that after the completion of his voyage, “Forthwith this frame of [his] was wrench’d/ With a woful agony,/ Which forced [him] to begin [his] tale;/ And then it left [him] free.” (579-582) Regardless of whether the wrenching pain be emotional, spiritual, or venereal, pain is that which begets his

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<sup>14</sup> A nouveau riche caricature of *The Satyricon*, Trimalchio is a freedman eunuch famed for his hospitality, pretension and utter buffoonery. Sheltering the protagonists of *The Satyricon* during a night wherein Trimalchio hosts a decadent feast, Trimalchio is here yoked to “The Rime’s” Hermit, another impotent shelterer of protagonists.

<sup>15</sup> A. W. Crawford, “On Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner,” 313

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 311

tale and the drive to tell his tale, and that the Mariner is reciting the “Rime” to the Bridegroom necessitates that he is not, in fact, freed from his compulsion.

Even if the Mariner actually had been in some way ransomed in the poem, there is little reason to attribute that ransoming to the Hermit. While the Mariner believes the Hermit will “shrieve [his] soul” (513) when the Hermit and his crew row out to meet the Mariner’s boat, that belief is never substantiated. While the Mariner does manage to beg the Hermit for the afore desired shriving, the Hermit only responds, “Say quick...I bid thee say-/ What manner of man art thou?” (577-579) The Mariner then abruptly launches into the description of his “woeful agony.” While sea-snakes and strange spirits are accorded dozens of lines in the poem, the Mariner’s purported salvation, if indeed a gift of the Hermit, is granted two lines and a question aborted with its absent answer. If “Nature’s High Priest” has any potency, it is not reflected in the amount of text the priest commands.

Neither is there any potency in the physical descriptions of the Hermit himself. The Mariner’s description of the Hermit’s prayer habits— “He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve—/He hath a cushion plump:/ It is the moss that wholly hides/ The rotted old oak-stump” (520-523)—is, in theory, a portrait of true piety and of the Hermit’s acceptance of and whole dependence upon the gifts of nature. However, the individual words of the description cannot escape their connotations of physical weakness, submissiveness, and, most intriguingly, their specific allusions to a decadent literary figure of Latin literature. Most obviously, the “cushion plump” that the Mariner “hath” is his “oak-stump.” Yet it also

functions as a double entendre connoting the Hermit's posterior, one with a literary genealogy that can be traced back to the late 1st century of the common era with Petronius' reputed publication of the *Satyricon Liber* and its cushion-bound eunuch, Trimalchio.

*The Satyricon*, a raunchy tale detailing a group of libertine men suffering from the indignation of Priapus and the resultant erectile dysfunctions, seems a remarkably unlikely source for any of Coleridge's writings. A voluminous writer on most matters under the sun, Coleridge is uncharacteristically laconic on matters of sexuality, explicitly referring to sexual intercourse only once in his assorted *Marginalia*, claiming that "the act is both foolish, & degrading." (*Marginalia* 1.754) Even in Coleridge's conversation poems that either feature his wife Sara or are somehow begotten by her, such as "The Eolian Harp"<sup>17</sup> and "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison,"<sup>18</sup> Sara serves as an incidental catalyst for the imaginative fancies of Coleridge's narrators. Yet there are two moments in Coleridge's corpus in which he actively engages the *Satyricon*, though he obfuscates his source in both. When, in the *Biographia Literaria*, he defends circuitous and non-linear poems such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge claims that a fixation on a naturally progressing plot is "Praecipitandus est liber spiritus,"<sup>19</sup> says Petronius most happily." (Chapter XIV) The second engagement with Petronius is

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<sup>17</sup> In which Sara is explicitly named as a chastising force preventing Coleridge's seemingly heretical thoughts.

<sup>18</sup> In which Coleridge is "imprisoned" after Sara spilled a skillet of boiling milk on Coleridge's foot, thus preventing Coleridge's joining of his friends for a walk.

<sup>19</sup> "A ruining of the spirit of the book": My translation.

even more laconic and takes the form of a notebook scribbling from the 1830s, where Coleridge prefaces a discussion of the contemporary public ministers of England with a Latin epigram, “Peritura Troja perdidit primum Deos,” which translates “Troy first fell to perdition when they profaned the gods.”<sup>20</sup> While this seems a perfectly typical introductory epigram to a dissatisfied yet pious man’s philippic against his clergy, it is unattributed and uncredited, though it is taken directly from the eighty-ninth chapter of the *Satyricon*.

Coleridge is not known for his meticulous citation and scrupulous attributions. Yet, taken together, these two references to Petronius violate the standard method Coleridge uses to discuss classical authors: generally, when alluding to ancient Greeks or Latins, either through direct quotation or biographical references, he tends to include their names in lists. Most humorously, in his *Satyrane Letters*, he caricatures a drunken Danish man who espouses a bit of Unitarian philosophy and then questions his audience, saying “Do I not speak like Socrates, and Plato, and Cato—they were all philosophers, my dear philosophe! all very great men!—and so was Homer and Virgil” (Letter I). While the drunkard’s a bit over-eager in his evocation of five “philosophers,” he doesn’t radically depart from Coleridge’s tendency to write of “Plato and Plotinus” (Chapter IX) rather than simply “Plato” or “Plotinus.” Petronius, however, never enters Coleridge’s various listings, rendering him as one of the few classical authors that Coleridge considers intellectually isolated.

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<sup>20</sup> My translation.

All of this suggests that Coleridge feels some sense of shame in openly acknowledging a debt to Petronius. In the surviving fragments *Satyricon*, *pulvinus* and *cervicale*, two Latin terms for a cushion, are used six times in describing the possessions of the plump and debauched eunuch Trimalchio. While the Hermit's cushion is granted only a single line in the "The Rime," "The Rime" is a much more condensed work than the *Satyricon*. But cushion affection alone is not the only trait shared by Trimalchio and the Hermit: just as the Hermit "loves to talk with marineres/ That come from a far countree," (518-519) Trimalchio's dinners are replete with Greeks, street vagabonds, and whomever else might wash up near his home. Whereas Trimalchio sustains his hospitable lifestyle through the use of his talented adult slaves and fetching slave-boys, the Hermit has the Pilot and his boy. And just as Trimalchio is defined by his status as a eunuch, the Hermit is defined by a "rotted old oak-stump" that is closely associated with his cushion plump. Crawford's conception of the Hermit as a "Priest of Nature" seemed unconvincing due to the Hermit's altar of decay, but if we conceive of the Hermit as a "Priest of Nature" in the same sense as we conceive of Trimalchio as a philosopher—as nothing more than a child tossing about golden skeletons and parroting a few garbled aphorisms about mortality—then we can understand both the sere altar and the utter incompetence exhibited by the Hermit in his interactions with the Mariner. Coleridge, in describing the Hermit, is not interested in pathos, existentialism, dread or faith: rather, he is simply recreating the *Satyricon's* Roman farce in the British countryside.

### III. Encolpius<sup>21</sup>

If the Hermit is a reimagination of Trimalchio, then the narrator of our “Rime” refigures Encolpius, the narrator of the *Satyricon*. When considering the syphilitic reading of the Mariner’s affliction that we had heretofore undertaken, this parallel between the Mariner and Encolpius seems remarkably apt: what could be a more suitable revision of a curse from the god of erections than a venereal disease such as syphilis? Consider, moreover, the physiognomic features of a wandering Albatross, focusing upon its beak:



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The Mariner profaned the interminably erect god: Nature has no need of a Hermit High Priest when so clear a physicotheology is inscribed upon its productions.

There is a vast history of losing sight of our so specifically endowed bird in criticism of “The Rime.” Edward E. Bostetter, for example, makes much of the

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<sup>21</sup> The narrator of the *Satyricon*, Encolpius is a hapless young rake whose poor choice of friends beget many of his misfortunes. In “The Rime,” Encolpius corresponds to the Mariner himself as both are dragged along through a surreal misfortunes and are afterwards condemned to tell their tales.

<sup>22</sup> This image is cropped from the following source: <https://pixnio.com/fauna-animals/birds/albatross-birds-pictures/albatross-bird-steiller-albatross-diomedea-albatrus>

inordinate punishment of the Mariner, claiming that readers accepting the interpretation that the Mariner deserves the privations of his voyage due to his slaughter of the Albatross are fundamentally blinded by foundational lapsarian theologies and unable to see the incommensurate gap between the Mariner's "crime [and his] punishment,"<sup>23</sup> parroting arguments that begot the Demiurge of Gnostic Christianity<sup>24</sup> and the Nothingness of Augustine<sup>25</sup> millenia ago: if there is an omnibenevolent and omnipotent creator, what allows its theoretically perfect creations to go awry and how could it be surprised if they do somehow falter? Bostetter proceeds to question whom can ultimately be held responsible for the Mariner's incipient sin: "It throws into question the moral and intellectual responsibilities of the universe. To the extent that the Mariner's act of pride and capricious sadism sets in motion retributory forces of the same nature, the question is inevitably raised: how responsible is he ultimately for his act of evil? How much is his act simply the reflex of a universal pattern of action?"<sup>26</sup> Bostetter thus subsumes "The Rime" into the much longer history of the theological disputations of the Fall. And just as the apple, pomegranate, or citrus tree is considered incidental to "Man's First Disobedience," the Albatross is considered incidental to the Mariner's tale: neither those who accept the Mariner's

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<sup>23</sup> Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of 'The Ancient Mariner,'" 244

<sup>24</sup> While the Demiurge's position in Gnostic theology varies widely depending on source and tradition, its role in the universe as a corrupted physical manifestation of the Logos or the divine remains consistent. It, in its corruption, brought forth a corrupted material plane, allowing evil to exist within the physical world without allowing that evil to touch the purely spiritual Logos.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII.

<sup>26</sup> Bostetter, "Nightmare World," 244



punishment or those who cavil at its cruelty acknowledge the slaughtered bird as a fundamentally phallic bird.

Of course, there are individuals who have focused on reading the symbol of the bird rather than the symbolic slaughtering of the bird. In Beverly Field's *Reality's Dark Dream: Dejection in Coleridge*, she writes that Coleridge's "uncertainty about his own sexual nature may account for the image of the dead bird that hangs around the mariner's neck, as though it were an emblem of displaced genitalia, which suggests the female both in its analogy to the breast and its force as attribute to the primitive mother goddess." (85) The Albatross has been read variously as Coleridge's father,<sup>27</sup> as a hermaphroditic mother,<sup>28</sup> as a manifestation of an oral fixation,<sup>29</sup> etc. All of these psychoanalytic readings have operated under the assumption that the Albatross and the poem's sexual undercurrents are unconscious manifestations of an unbridled-id of Coleridge.

But why must we attribute to the unconscious that which could very well be a conscious creation of the poet? While it is unlikely that Coleridge scribed the Mariner with the intention to create some egregorian conception of a primitive Earth Goddess, the Albatross could very well be evocative of a phallus because it was intended as a phallic symbol. Lest we forget, the Albatross first enters the poem with "At length did cross an Albatross,/Thorough the fog it came;" (63-65) *came* having developed a sexual connotation as early as the mid-seventeenth

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<sup>27</sup> David Beres, "A Dream, A Vision, and a Poem: a Psychoanalytic Study of the Origins of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" 105.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Angus, "The Theme of Love and Guilt in Coleridge's Three Major Poems," 661.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Jane Lipton, "'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner': The Agony of Thirst," 157.

century.<sup>30</sup> Linguistically, Coleridge wastes no more than a line before the Albatross is established under the auspices of Priapus.

And the bird's relation to Grecian and Latin gods is made more apparent in the 1817 version of "The Rime," with its included marginal gloss. While I'll treat the gloss and its complications more fully in a latter section of this piece, I'll here focus on the glosser's fixation on inscribing the Albatross and its death within a discussion of hospitality and its violations. In three of the glosser's four descriptions of the Albatross' interactions with the Mariner and his crew, the glosser repeats the term hospitality: "in contempt of the laws of hospitality, killed a Sea-Bird"; "Till a great sea-bird, called the Albatross, came through the snow-fog, and was received with great joy and hospitality"; "The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." Maud Bodkin, one of the few scholars to give much weight to this concept of a violated hospitality in the "Rime," supplies a Hellenic perspective of guest-rite in her *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination*, claiming that the slaughter of the Albatross "has the nature of a crime against the sanctity of a guest—the sin which, according to ancient feeling, incurred the special wrath of heaven and called out the Erinyes upon the track of the offender." (57) Bodkin's analysis rests in its conclusion that Coleridge is evoking a singular Grecian motif as a bit of literary gild on "The Rime." Yet, if we consider the fourth description of our engaged Albatross, "And lo! the Albatross proveth a bird of good omen," we shall

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cum>

notice that another iterated word, omen, is firmly inherited from the classical world—omens and a flying, wild bird being the constituent elements of the inveterate Greco-Roman practice of augury.<sup>31</sup> Taken together, the bird not only alludes to Grecian myth but is embodied in and defined by the classical world. Thus, we can even read the killing of the Albatross as an act censured by a defined religious stricture: augurs are meant to interpret the flight patterns of birds, not kill them. When the crew foists the corpse of the Albatross on the Mariner's neck ("Instead of the cross, the Albatross/ About my neck was hung," (141-142) they physically remind the Mariner that he muddled the distinction between augur and haruspex, or entrail-reader, and is thus deserving of opprobrium of both men and gods. And who should censure the profane it not for the offended god?

The censure comes quickly. Shortly after the Mariner's foul deed against the Albatross, the following stanzas detail how both crew and nature turn against our Mariner:

For all averr'd, I had kill'd the bird  
 That made the breeze to blow.  
 Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,  
 That made the breeze to blow!...

Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Cicero's *De Divinatione*

The glorious Sun uprist:  
The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow follow'd free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,  
'Twas sad as sad could be;  
And we did speak only to break  
The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,  
The bloody Sun, at noon,  
Right up above the mast did stand,  
No bigger than the Moon. (91-110)

The sexual imaginary here is readily apparent: before the bird was slain, the eager breeze could happily blow about white foam all-round a sea where a group of men were free to burst into a virginal sea that had never before been penetrated. After? Down went the breeze and the sails, and thus no longer flowed the foam; the Sun—homophonic with Son—which had heretofore arisen close and in all its glory, was physically displaced from the men; and though the

mast, the sole phallic symbol left accessible to the men, still stood, it is firmly fixed in a hot and bloody world with no potential of relief: in this first tribulation of the Mariner, he is made to suffer the physical privations of Priapus himself. The eventual equalizing of the Sun and Moon in the final stanza functions wonderfully in traditional psychoanalytic and queer readings of “The Rime” as well as in my *Satyricon*-based reading. In divining a Male principle and Female principle in the Sun and Moon respectively, we see that the Sun becomes as distant as the Moon only after the crew castigates the Mariner for his bird-shooting: as the crew begins to loathe the Mariner, they cease to be available as potential companions in the Mariner’s sexual release, thus becoming as erotically distant as the land-bound and completely absent women. In the *Satyricon*-informed reading, this process matches the progression of Encolpius’ curse from Priapus, the curse first taking effect only when Encolpius attempts to and fails at having sexual relations with Giton, his male slave and lover. In both “The Rime” and the *Satyricon*, the curse first manifests when physically present males become as sexually unavailable as physically non-present females.

But a classical psychoanalytic reading begins to falter shortly thereafter. While the water-snakes that are soon to be blessed by and to bless the Mariner serve as the most traditionally Freudian images of the “Rime,” as emblems of desire they strut upon the stage a bit too late for them to serve as the representation of fulfilled desire. Admittedly not countenancing necrophilic explanations, the snakes arrive after the death of the crew and thus the

disappearance of all the potential sexual partners of the Mariner. And while an image of snakes sliding through the dark, surging through the waves and writhing about in some terrible clutch of circumstance would be a meet representation of a straining but unreaching Mariner, these sea-snakes are not those struggling snakes: "I watch'd the water-snakes:/ They moved in tracks of shining white,/ And when they rear'd, the elfish light/ Fell off in hoary flakes." (274-278) These serpents and their "hoary flakes" are much more imagistically aligned with an orgasm than any incapability to reach orgasm: "O happy living things! no tongue/ Their beauty might declare:/ A spring of love gush'd from my heart,/ And I bless'd them unaware." (282-286) Beauty begets the springing and gushing of love, and just as love is springing, the Mariner claims that "The selfsame moment [he] could pray;/ And from [his] neck so free/ The Albatross fell off, and sank/ Like lead into the sea" (289-293), thus symbolically rupturing the link between the Mariner and Priapus. The Mariner, after having once more "gushed," is no longer marked with the icon of the perpetually impotent deity.

Due to the fragmentary nature of Petronius' text, the propitiation of Priapus, if actually described in the originally liber, is entirely absent from the extant text. After a dozen or so surviving trials in which the companions cursed by Priapus attempt to expiate themselves, Encolpius suddenly and unaccountably describes his friend "Eumolpus, qui tam frugi erat ut illi etiam ego puer viderer" (Chapter 140) ("Eumolpus, who was so aroused that even I was a

strapping lad in his eyes,”<sup>32</sup>) and then proceeds to narrate how Eumolpus wielded that recovered continence with a matron and her daughter. The curse of the Priapus is broken, and there’s no surviving explanation as to the mechanics of that broken curse. The water-serpents of the “The Rime,” while serving as sublime phallic symbols, pose a unique challenge to those who seek a cohesive meaning to “The Rime.” From Robert Penn Warren’s “One Life” interpretation<sup>33</sup> to Thomas Pfau’s vision of a “catastrophic modernity” harrowing Coleridge in his writing,<sup>34</sup> many readings of the “The Rime” fail to account for a salvation that is inset in the middle of a carnival of horrors. For those who seek a message of reconciliation, why don’t the snakes, purported bearers of that reconciliation, actually end or alleviate the suffering of the Mariner? For those who desire “The Rime” to be a madcap and yet utterly horrific vision, why are we then confronted by this beautiful balm in the midst of our tribulations?

If, however, we see the water-snakes as messengers of our offended god, and we see “The Rime” as a recreation of our debauched-novel, then the soteriology of the water-snakes becomes utterly inconsequential. In the *Satyricon*, Priapus is sated, and that is all we are granted the ability to know: the inexplicability of the water-snakes, either in providing salvation to the Mariner or in simply signaling an end to the first phase of his erectile dysfunctions, serves as

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<sup>32</sup>My translation.

<sup>33</sup>Wherein the snakes serve as an act of reconciliation with nature, counteracting the murder that is against nature.

<sup>34</sup>Wherein the snakes, in having not released the Mariner from bondage, reflect a world in which spiritual salvation is rapidly becoming an impossibility.

a perfect reinterpretation of a rite of purification that is ultimately lost. The purport of the water-snakes in “The Rime” is not what the snakes represent or can be made to represent, but rather the elliptical nature of their presentation. Critics are befuddled by Coleridge’s water-snakes because they assume the Mariner’s blessing of the water-snakes is meant to be the climactic moment of the Mariner’s salvation in “The Rime.” In this satyrnine reading, the water-snakes are simply visible manifestations of an earlier lacunal episode wherein Priapus begins to relent in his excoriation of the Mariner.

This lacunal interpretation of “The Rime” also provides an explanation for our earlier concerns surrounding the odd temporality of the water-snakes arriving after the death of the crew. In both “The Rime” and the *Satyricon*, as we have mentioned, the curse is discovered when homosexual climatic couplings become as impossible as distant heterosexual ones: in both the *Satyricon* and “The Rime,” the lifting of the curse is discovered—at least to the reader—not when the original coupling is brought to fruition, but rather when our narrators are vicariously viewing or hearing about the climaxes of others. Regardless of whether the “spring of love” that bursts from the Mariner references an actualized bit of onanism on his part, salvation for the Mariner is discovered only through the “hoary flakes” of the snakes and not a flaking of his own. On its own, “The Rime” is a startling work of disjointures and dissonances, defying and disputing those who’d seek a cohesive meaning: if however, we consider “The Rime” as a reimagination of a louche and fragmentary tale to which it seemingly mirrors, we



can begin to reconcile many of the attributes of “The Rime” that have so often refused reconciliation.

IV. Agamemnon<sup>35</sup>

But a strict reimagining of the *Satyricon* does not reconcile all aspects of the Mariner's journey, not even the one which opened this piece. If the water-snakes bore Priapus' dispatch, reconciling himself to the offending Mariner, then why does the Mariner seem infected with an uncured case of syphilis at the conclusion of "The Rime"? Encolpius was wholly cured, so why not our rimer? Furthermore, if we were to accept the *Satyricon* as the primary source for "The Rime," then how do we account for the aspects of horror that cannot be severed from the text? After all, the dominant atmosphere of the poem seems to be one of unbridled anxiety: both the Mariner's tale and the Mariner's need to tell it are begot in dire woe; the ballad form, rapid in and rapidly shifting between its trimeter and tetrameter, is never placid; and the Wedding-guest, serving as our model listener, beats at "his breast" (31) when forced to hear that to which the reader is subjecting themselves. This description of the poem does not a satyr-play make.

But no standard satyr-play should we expect from Coleridge considering his reactions to genres of the lewd. We've already touched upon his inapposite Petronius, but Coleridge's censoring omissions extend beyond the *Satyricon*, even effacing the genre of satyr-plays from his writing and his understanding of tragic history. In an advertisement for a two-part play and its somewhat lengthy

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<sup>35</sup> The Greek teacher of rhetoric in the *Satyricon*, Agamemnon procures the protagonists of the *Satyricon* their invitations to Trimalchio's dinner party, thus serving as the catalyst for the romps that follow while not, himself, being an actor in those romps. Here, Agamemnon is linked to the glosser, who seemingly resents the Mariner on his journey in 1817 from a safe and detached position.

prelude, Coleridge claims he images his work “as a somewhat nearer resemblance to the plan of the ancients, of which one specimen is left us in the *Æschylean Trilogy* of the *Agamemnon*, the *Orestes*, and the *Eumenides*,” but makes no mention of *Proteus*,<sup>36</sup> the satyr-play accompanying said trilogy and transforming it into a tetralogy. While *Proteus* is not, in fact, “left us,” “the plan of the ancients” included a puerile fourth play disrupting the doleful gravity of its partners that Coleridge seems content to forget. Both this advertisement and the *Biographia Literaria*, with its surreptitious reference to Petronius, were published in 1817, bidding us to question if this avoidance of the risqué was something that developed over Coleridge’s poetic career. If so, “The Rime,” being one of Coleridge’s earliest poems, is granted an additional license to licentiousness.

And indeed, Coleridge’s willingness to engage sexual themes lessens remarkably in both his poems and his critical works of the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Most markedly, Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode” undergoes a massive transformation between its first drafting in April 1802 and its widespread publication a few months later in October.<sup>37</sup> Originally titled “Letter to Sara Hutchinson,” Coleridge’s draft was a candid exploration of his utter despondency in the impossibility of his divorce from Sara Fricker and a remarriage to Hutchinson. In the intervening months between the draft and the October publication, Coleridge’s explicit engagements with his “adulterous” desires are

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<sup>36</sup> Thought to be the tale of Menelaus and Helen in Egypt: for comparison, see Euripides’ surviving play on the subject, *Helen*.

<sup>37</sup> Dates are taken from the University of Toronto’s website “Representative Poetry Online.”

stripped from the poem. “This, Sara! Well thou know’st, / Is that sore Evil, which I dread the most / And oft’nest suffer!” (ll. 25-27) becomes “O Lady! In this wan and heartless mood, / To other thoughts by yonder woo’d” (ll. 5-6): Sara becomes a generic figure, the pun that yokes Coleridge’s suffering to a “nest” or home is effaced, and the hint of a corporal suffering that we get from “sore” is replaced with the wholly ephemeral reflection on the wooing of thoughts. Anya Taylor, in tracing the erotic themes throughout Coleridge’s early work, claims that many of his poems can be read as lamentations “that the yearnings that impel men and women cannot be satisfied.” She then claims that in “his 1826 essay ‘On the Passions’[,] Coleridge specifically relates this hunger to puberty.”<sup>38</sup> In Coleridge’s transformation of a “Letter to Sara Hutchinson” to “Dejection: An Ode,” we see a targeted and specific bodily yearning of a slightly younger Coleridge utterly excised from a poem in favor of a cerebral, and thus non-adulterous, reflection. Over the course of a few months, Coleridge seemingly dismissed his “hunger of puberty.”

But not in poetry alone do we see the diminishing of Coleridge’s willingness to engage the indecorous. When Mary E. Robinson attempted to include Coleridge’s poems in an 1804 anthology along with those of Matthew Lewis, juvenile author of the infamous *The Monk*, Coleridge wrote the following frantic letter to Robinson:

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<sup>38</sup> Anya Taylor, *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce*, 62-63.

I have a wife, I have sons, I have an infant Daughter--what excuse could I offer to my own conscience if by suffering my name to be connected with those of Mr. Lewis... [or if] I was occasion of their reading *The Monk*.... [Should I be] be an infamous Pander to the Devil in the seduction of my own offspring?--My head turns giddy, my heart sickens at the very thought of seeing such books in the hands of a child of mine.<sup>39</sup>

This vehemence is quite surprising when we consider that Coleridge had already indelibly yoked his name to Lewis in a 1797 critical review of *The Monk*, wherein he wrote that Lewis' "work is distinguished by the variety and impressiveness of its incidents; and the author everywhere discovers an imagination rich, powerful, and fervid. Such are the excellencies."<sup>40</sup> While Coleridge's praise quickly turns to a diatribe against *The Monk's* vulgarity and its resultant unsuitability for children, this earlier philippic never localizes the terror of a parent in Coleridge's own body, though Coleridge already had his first child the year before. Time, not parentage, is that which distanced Coleridge from works such as *The Monk*. And in the years of 1797 and 1798 in which "The Rime" was first drafted and published, time had effected no distance. The writer of "The Rime" seemed content to link his name to pulpy, pornographic fiction. The writer of "The Rime" seemed content to scribe his desires for an adulterous affair and a divorce: the writer of "The Rime" was still quite "pubescent."

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<sup>39</sup> Letter 479 of the "Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge."

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Review of Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk*," (*The Critical Review*, Feb. 1797)

That sense of Coleridge's lost pubescence explains one of the most controversial aspects of "The Rime," the 1817 marginal gloss. David B. Pirie and William Empson dismiss the gloss as nothing more than an aging Coleridge's "most serious attempt to distract the reader from the poem," citing the gloss' pretensions and occasional misreadings of the poem as the source of their dissatisfaction.<sup>41</sup> Wendy Wall claims that "The gloss and the verse live in a parasitic type of relationship, subverting the authority of each other."<sup>42</sup> Jerome McGann claims that the gloss is an attempt to harmonize "three fundamental ideologies [of the poem]: pagan superstition and philosophy, Catholic legend and theology, and Broad Church Protestantism... [into] a final (divine)" view of the poem."<sup>43</sup> Each of these critics asserts that the gloss is inset within the text primarily to transform the experience of the reader of "The Rime": the vast discrepancies between these readings of the marginal gloss bid us to question if the gloss is intended to communicate much of anything to the reader at all.

The glosser, by the very virtue of glossing, claims the mantle of a literary critic, and his criticisms are ad hoc meditations on that which catches his fancy in "The Rime." Coleridge, while creating his glosser, was also compiling his *Biographia Literaria*, a work of ad hoc meditations on the literatures and philosophies that caught his fancy with no apparent structure save that each chapter remains a response to that which originally caught his fancy. The

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<sup>41</sup> David B. Pirie and William Empson, *Coleridge's Verse: A Selection*, 214.

<sup>42</sup> Wendy Wall, "Interpreting Poetic Shadows: The Gloss of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" 187.

<sup>43</sup> Jerome J. McGann, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," 51.

glosser, in one of his longer flights, reacts to the Mariner's encounter with a plagues spirit, claiming: "A Spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet... concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more" (Gloss to lines 130-134). Entirely a divagation, this gloss has thus far only been treated as a "metaphysical device, making the reader self-conscious about the act of reading and interpretation,"<sup>44</sup> in providing readers an example of one who overreads or misreads the text, rendering the glosser's specific interest in natural philosophy as irrelevant to the disruption that the gloss provides.

However, we can find some value in the glosser's treatment of spirits if we turn to Coleridge's own discourse on natural philosophy in the *Biographia Literaria*. In chapter five, subtitled "On the law of Association," Coleridge writes:

The wise Stagyrte speaks of no... nervous or animal spirits... as the followers of Des Cartes, and the humoral pathologists in general; nor of an oscillating ether which was to effect the same service for the nerves of the brain considered as solid fibres, as the animal spirits perform for them under the notion of hollow tubes, as Hartley teaches.

Aesthetically, this section of the *Literaria* exemplifies how Coleridge pens his discursive summations of philosophy. Intermingling aspects of theory with the occasional reference to the progenitor of a theory, Coleridge's philosophical

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<sup>44</sup> Wall, "Poetic Shadows," 185

discourse tends towards free association after engaging a topic such as “animal spirits,” just as the glosser in “The Rime” engages “spirits” by intermingling discussions of spiritual climes with the recorders of those climes, Josephus and Pselus. In diction and in style, the glosser is fashioned in the image of Coleridge, and thus we are made to question why so inadequate a reader as the glosser is crafted with so many traits of the author.

But the glosser is not wholly crafted in Coleridge’s image, and in the distancing between glosser and author lies our solutions to the glosser’s oddities. If we consider a philosophy attacked in the *Biographia*’s excerpt, namely, that of David Hartley, we can see an evolution of Coleridge’s philosophy that developed sometime between the period in which he first crafted “The Rime” and that in which he crafted its gloss. In the earlier period, Coleridge was enamored enough of the theories of David Hartley to name his firstborn child in honor of the philosopher: by 1817, Coleridge includes Hartley in his catalog of unwise philosophers who countenance spirits. The glosser, in scribing his learned digression on spirits, finds himself in accord with the Coleridge of 1798 rather than the Coleridge of 1817. The glosser is a simulacrum of Coleridge’s youth, suggesting that Coleridge’s imagined and ideal reader of “The Rime” is not the prudent (and prudish) reader that Coleridge would become but the prurient and pubescent reader that Coleridge once had been in the yearnings of his youth. Huntington Brown claims that Coleridge’s “Rime” is his endeavor to create a fundamentally Gothic tale and the gloss is meant “to provide a chorus to [that]



end. One function of a dramatic chorus is to convey mere information; but a more important one is to set the right mood and point of view for the spectator."<sup>45</sup> While Brown's assertion of the poem's apparent Gothic status ignores the many oddities of the text,<sup>46</sup> Brown's view of the glosser as a classical chorus is entirely correct: the chorus just happens to be the chorus of *Proteus* rather than *Orestes*. The glosser serves as a senseless and contradictory addition to the 1817 edition of the poem if one expects the glosser to teach the reader how to read the poem: however, the glosser becomes a perfectly cogent addition to "The Rime" if the glosser is instead meant to convey both who should read the poem and who had originally written the poem.

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<sup>45</sup> Huntington Brown, "The Gloss to The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," 324.

<sup>46</sup> As previously discussed in the bucking of narrative convention when "The Rime" is viewed through its Wordsworthian criticism.

V. Giton<sup>47</sup>

The primary reason that the glosser becomes such a contentious figure in criticism of “The Rime” is his seemingly arbitrary engagement with the text: not only does the glosser “lie,” he also fixates upon the “wrong” parts of the text. He expounds upon relatively simple lines in the poem such as “The Sun's rim dips; the stars rush out:/ At one stride comes the dark” (200-201) with esoteric assertions such as there is “No twilight within the courts of the Sun.” But for the Mariner's prolonged circumlocution around a thunderstorm, “The upper air burst into life;/ And a hundred fire-flags sheen;/ To and fro they were hurried about!/ And to and fro, and in and out,” (314-318) the glosser provides no explanation. The glosser fails to make coherent “The Rime” because the glosser refuses to explain any of its fundamentally incoherent aspects.

However, if we consider that which the glosser chooses to gloss rather than the content of the glosses, we can notice some consistency in his interests. The “Albatross” and its “curse,” our symbol of Priapus and his punishment, are the glosser's most repeated nouns save “The Mariner.” At no point in the Mariner's “Rime” is either “Sun” or “Moon” mentioned more than two stanzas from a gloss. The terms “death” and “dead” likewise call the glosser's attention. Adhering to our earlier reading of the Sun as a male principle and the Moon as a female principle, the glosser's attention is pricked whenever these icons of sex

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<sup>47</sup> The sixteen-year old slave and object of Encolpius' desire in *The Satyricon*, Giton is figured throughout the *Satyricon* as symbol of Encolpius beautiful and ultimately reclaimable youth. Here, Giton represents Coleridge's image of the ideal pubescent and lusting reader of “The Rime.”

are introduced in the poem. Likewise does the euphemistic death draw him. When the Hermit is introduced as “Hermit good [which] lives in that wood,” (515) the glosser provides the wholly wanting “The Hermit of the Wood,” and the only moment when the glosser becomes so overcome with zeal that he provides two glosses for a single stanza is when that “spring of love gush’d from [the Mariner’s] heart.” While the glosser’s comments are rarely germane to the supernal journey of the Mariner, they fixate upon the sexual themes, match our eunuch character in impotence, and hurry to a heady climax along with our Mariner: the glosser calls attention to those parts of the poem which most clearly reflect their origin in the *Satyricon*. Of course, the ostensible content of the gloss makes no more explicit the connection between the Latin romp and the Mariner’s tale than the original version of “The Rime,” but we cannot expect more candor from the aging Coleridge, who, by 1817, cannot bear to yoke a satyr-play to its companions in the *Oresteia*. We should, however, find it remarkable that Coleridge, aged by a score of years, found it necessary to revert to the philosophies and the sensualities of his youth in order to add anything of substance to “The Rime.” Even in Coleridge’s middle-aged prudence, he could not bring his glosser to dis sever “The Rime” from its pubescent, *Satyricon*-laden origin.

This pubescent origin of “The Rime” then explains the agonized and anxious ambiance of the poem as a whole. Recalling that Coleridge associates pubescence with the belief that the “yearnings that impel men and women cannot

be satisfied,” we can understand how a source-text as farcical as the *Satyricon* becomes the terror-stricken “Rime.” Coleridge, in articulating his original intentions for “The Rime” in the *Biographia*, claims that

the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. (Chapter XIV)

Coleridge wrote this “comedy” not from the perspective of the comic and detached Petronius, but rather from the desperate psychology of a lusty youth suddenly stricken with impotency. The rimer, the glosser, the intended reader, and the writer of “The Rime” conspire to create a tale laced with the passion of a youth who sees the ultimate death of all—and no little deaths in any—of his future passions. The horror! The horror!

In this regard, syphilis becomes the most visceral manifestation of Coleridge’s desire to make the supernatural “horrors” of the “The Rime” “real” to both Mariner and reader. Just as the Wedding-guest is “stunn’d, / And is of [a] sense forlorn” (623-624) at the conclusion of the poem, the reader is warned that a Nightmare Life-in-[a climaxing-]Death and its resultant madness are the potential wages of sexual acts. The Mariner, a “real” sufferer of that horror, could not convey a tale of that horror without his “woeful agony” readily apparent to his various audiences, and the Wedding-guest, a youth, could not hear this tale without some presentiment of his own potential sexual dysfunctions, syphilitic or

not. In Coleridge's *Table Talk*, he records his following conversation concerning "The Rime" with Anna Laetitia Barbauld:

Mrs Barbauld once told me that she admired The Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it -- it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgement the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination."<sup>48</sup>

Frances Ferguson summarizes the predominant critical reactions to Coleridge's claim as follows: "On the one hand, critics have harnessed this passage [in] an attempt to eschew interpretation... [while] on the other hand... [critics claim that this passage] affirms that Coleridge had intended the poem to have a 'moral sentiment' but felt he had been a trifle unsubtle in fulfilling his intention."<sup>49</sup> Neither school of critical thought is altogether satisfying as neither school attempts to explain why Coleridge claims that the intrusion of a moral sentiment is a "fault" in the poem. But if we consider the effect syphilis has upon the poem, namely, that it twists the hermetic burlesque romp into a Hogarthian morality play, then we can see syphilis as a real "fault" within the poem that disrupts the satyr-play of the whole. Syphilis is the singular fear of the poem that draws primarily upon a

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<sup>48</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk of S.T. Coleridge*, relayed conversation of May 31. 1830.

<sup>49</sup> Frances Ferguson, "COLERIDGE AND THE DELUDED READER: 'THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER,'" 619.

potential reader's own fear rather than on the delusions of the Mariner, and thus syphilis is the only disruption of the "pure imagination" of the rest of the poem: one need not imagine the visceral fear of what lurks beneath—or on top of, in this case—their very bed. Between the original "Rime" of 1798 and its 1817 revision, the majority of the Mariner's encounters were granted additional stanzas. The Mariner's description of the encounter with the Nightmare Life-in-Death and her mate, however, shrunk from five stanzas to three in the course of Coleridge's revisions. If Coleridge attempted to excise the "only" flaw of the poem in his revision, he attempted that excision here in lessening the role of the Nightmare in the poem as a whole. Syphilis, Coleridge learned, became an intrusion of a too "real" death in Pan's Arcadia. "The Rime" was never meant to be either a "Pilgrim's Progress"<sup>50</sup> or a "Rake's"<sup>51</sup>: rather, it is and was always meant to be a tale of pure Faunus.

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<sup>50</sup> John Bunyan's 1678 retelling of the Gospel narrative, A. W. Crawford cites it as the base-text for "The Rime" in "On Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner'" (312).

<sup>51</sup> Referencing Hogarth's before-treated plates.

## Conclūsiō

“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβνλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἄπο Θανείν Θέλω.”<sup>52</sup>

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s preface to his 1817 *Sibylline Leaves* claims the allusive title springs from the “fragmentary and widely scattered state in which [the included poems of the collection had] long been suffered to remain.” “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” had been a fragmentary and scattered poem since its inception, but its fragmentation is not due to either the lack of a curating antiquarian’s passion or the oddity of its original publication alongside Wordsworth’s other *Lyrical Ballads*. Instead, the poem’s fragmentation is a deliberate evocation of its source in classical literature, the *Satyricon Liber* of Petronius. While the great tragedy of temporal linearity precludes us from asserting that Coleridge would have developed his image of the Sybil from T.S. Eliot’s epigraph of “The Waste Land,” Coleridge’s adept though laconic wielding of the *Satyricon* and Petronius in both the *Biographia* and his 1830 *Marginalia* suggests that Coleridge, like Eliot, had ample opportunity to be captivated by Petronius’ image of the shriveled Sybil swaying in her cage at Cumae and wishing for a death that never came.

Coleridge would have been charmed by the linguistic irony added to the scene over the eras, where the relayer of the horrific image of the hanging Sybil

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<sup>52</sup> “I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her: ‘Sibyl, what do you want?’ she answered: ‘I want to die.’” The original quotation is from chapter 48 of Petronius’ *Satyricon*. The translation is from T.S. Eliot’s gloss of “The Waste Land.”

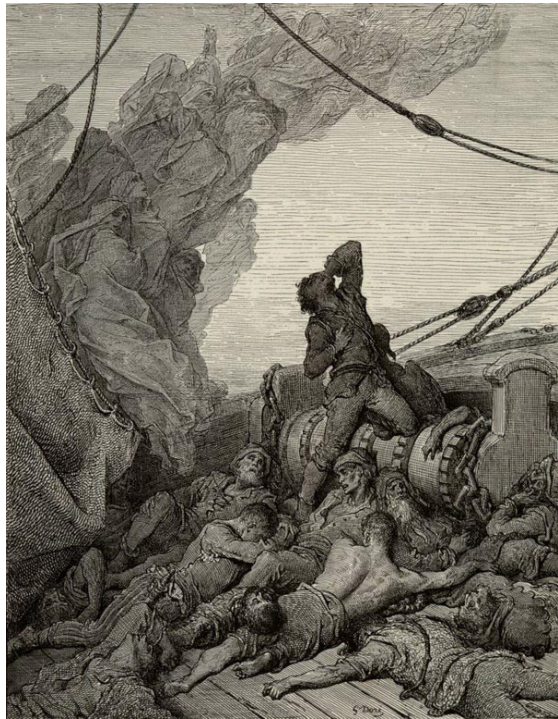
denied death was another who was forbidden (a euphemistic) death, the eunuch Trimalchio. Even in a singular moment of utter desolation in Petronius' bawdy text, Coleridge could find a certain strain of juvenile comedy. I suspect that Coleridge, intrigued by this blending of grotesque despair and pubescent humor, chose the allusive title of the *Sibylline Leaves* as another laconic hint that "The Rime" represents the admixtures of Coleridge and Petronius, pubescent humor and supernatural horror, Mariner and Encolpius, Death and death-a-slight-more-slight. The Mariner is certainly the closest figure to a shriveled prophet in Coleridge's verse: who could then gainsay the poem's having a more intimate connection to the collection's title than its companions?

And title alone is not the only apparent reminder in *The Sibylline Leaves* of the poem's foundation in Petronius. Immediately preceding "The Rime" in the collection is a piece of Coleridge's juvenilia called "Mutual Passion" with the prefatory note "Altered and modernized from an old Poet," seemingly matching the project undertaken by the *Sibylline Leaves* glosser of "The Rime" in removing the archaisms of the 1798 edition of "The Rime." "Mutual Passion" begins with "I love, and he loves me again," (1) and nowhere in "Mutual Passion" is the gender of the narrator specified. (ix-x) While I would not claim "Mutual Passion" is representative of a homosexual desire on Coleridge's part, it does force the reader to engage a male writer's perspective on a desire for men before beginning to plunge once more into "The Rime." The *Satyricon*, revolving around the trials and tribulations surrounding a group of men and explicit homosexual



desires, could have no better introduction than “Mutual Passion”—nor could, Coleridge believes, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

Gustave Doré’s 1877 illustrated edition of “The Rime” is introduced by the British Library with the following description: “Published in Leipzig, Germany, 80 years after the first publication of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, this edition indicates how Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s work had become a classic of European literature.”<sup>53</sup> The Library’s claim is certainly ambitious, but when we consider Doré’s plate prefacing the poem’s “The many men so beautiful! And they all dead did lie,” (237-238)



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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-ancient-mariner-illustrations-by-dore>

<sup>54</sup> *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* / illustrated by Gustave Doré [1798] ([http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/coleridge/samuel\\_taylor/rime/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/coleridge/samuel_taylor/rime/)) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, licensed as Creative Commons BY-NC-SA (2.5 AU).

we can easily justify the Library's claim. In this plate, a group of beautiful, disrobed men mutually die while lying entwined in one heap. Such a scene certainly evokes classic images of European literature: they simply happen to be concentrated within a few exclusively-male orgies in *The Satyricon*.

Unexpectedly, Doré's infusion of homoerotic sensuality to "The Rime" provides one of the most accurate readings of "The Rime" thus far.

We began this piece with Vlasopolos' claim that every generation has its interpretations of "The Rime." Thus far those generations have failed to focus on the "organs of generation" in "The Rime," and thus are continually refuted by the inherent senselessness of the Mariner's journey, the obfuscations of the gloss and the laconic nature of Coleridge's remarks around the poem. Coherency is not something that "The Rime" is primed to provide, unless, of course, we consider Coleridge's hints that the foundation of "The Rime" is in a satyr-play that he cannot bring himself to name. Then both the fragmentary nature of "The Rime" and the negative utility of any Coleridge's glosses resolve themselves into a new consistency. "The Rime" has far too much whim to function as either a grotesque horror or moral fable, but for a low-browed comedy, the whim does well suffice. Generations of critics have lionized or villainized "The Rime" while upholding its status as a foundational poem of modern English literature; few have considered that the author of "The Rime" may have primarily intended to rhyme a series of pubescent bawdy jokes.

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