"Kubla Khan" As an Integrationist Poem
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Socio-psychological studies of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" have proliferated in recent years, including Beverly Fields' treatment, Norman Fruman's criticism, and Eugene H. Sloane's "psychologizing." Predominant stress has been placed upon Freudian analysis. Jung has received fewer plaudits than Freud, perhaps mainly because there have been fewer Jungian interpretations of the poem. Fruman, for example, calls a typical Jungian view of "Kubla Khan" "fantastic" and "incredible," rather emotive terms. In general, the "collective unconscious" which Jung supported has met with disregard, partly because Northrop Frye has supplanted Jungian analysis with his new "mythic" attitude. Hence I approach the subject of a Jungian view of "Kubla Khan" with a certain amount of cautionary trepidation, especially when this view is to deal with "race."

My starting point is J. R. Ebbatson's fine article on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as an anti-racist poem, a view indebted to the writings of William Empson. Though it is true that in his later years Coleridge espoused some rather disturbing ethnological views, supporting for instance the idea of a "chosen" white race, Ebbatson reveals that when Coleridge "was active and fertile as a poet his commitment to the Negro cause was unquestioned." He therefore proposes "that the central act of 'The Ancient Mariner,' the shooting of the albatross, may be a symbolic rehearsal of the crux of colonial expansion, the enslavement of native peoples; and that the punishments visited upon the Mariner, and the deaths of his shipmates because of their complicity, may represent European racist guilt, and the need to make restitution." To corroborate this provocative conclusion, he cites, among many other references, lines from Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude," written about the same time as "Kubla Khan":

Even so, my countrymen! have we gone forth
And borne to distant tribes slavery and
pangs,
And deadlier far, our vices, whose deep
taint
With slow perditation murders the whole man,
His body and his soul!"

"Shades of Caliban!" we might say. Ebbatson does not cite "Kubla Khan" itself, which, with its Abyssinian maid, could lend itself to similar analysis; but when I asked him by letter he admitted that it too might be germane. If, then, the African allusion in the second part of "Kubla Khan" may also be a veiled reference to enslavement, such a theme might be enhanced in the reader's estimation through his awareness of collective imagery patterns throughout. And since Coleridge stated that he wrote the poem after having fallen asleep while reading Purchas His Pilgrimage, it may be relevant that the work to which Purchas's was a sequel was Leo Africanus's The History and Description of Africa (from which Purchas reproduced a large section). Coleridge was very likely aware of Leo's work too, since he was such an avid reader, and he may even have been cognizant of its influence upon earlier writers, notably Shakespeare in Othello. (Leo, we must remember, was himself a Black, and his distinction between "tawny" and "black" Ethiopians may have a bearing on the degree to which Othello is a "black moor.")

Before examining the specific function of the Abyssinian maid in "Kubla Khan," let us examine its collective imagery as a whole and then see how it fits in. The key symbol is that of the pleasure-dome; symbolically speaking, it has been accepted as a mammary gland symbol by Patricia M. Adair and others, particularly because of the "Milk of Paradise" allusion in the final line. But that any direct association need be drawn between the dome and lactic acid is problematic; one critic, Gerald E. Enscoe, objects that the adjective Coleridge uses, "stately," is somehow inappropriate in this context. The whole line "And drank the Milk of Paradise" seems to have led to "drunken" misinterpretation. (Having examined the manuscript of the poem in the British Museum, I would opt for the reading "And drank the Milk of Paradise" instead, which might help; at least it may be a soberer one.)

The point, however, is that the pleasure-dome may best be associated with Near Eastern, Indian, or African meanings. In ancient Persia, domes were traditionally colored blue or black to reflect the sky. So perhaps a true pleasure-dome conveys more heavenly or spiritual suggestiveness than carnal delight. Moreover, the Khan's garden is described in terms of an enclosure symbolic not only of the medieval hortus conclusus but of the original Edenic image. One aspect of this image is the spiral form, formerly associated with the creative process in the Egyptian system of hieroglyphics. This form is observable in the serpentine decor of the poem: the "sacred river" (suggestive of the Nile as well as the Ganges) meandering along with its "mazy motion." The maziness surely relates not only to the turbulent flow of the river in its steady course but to its serpentine windings. Since the
river is called Alph, it connotes the biblical "Alpha and Omega," the beginning and the end, and perhaps also the world as the serpent with its tail in its mouth (its end in its beginning, so to speak). Analogously, the 'mighty fountain' alludes to the basis of Creation, the fons (et origo) of all things. There is, further, the question of whether this particular Eden is not a false paradise set in Africa.

If the dome and river have more than Freudian significance, so do the references to women in "Kubla Khan." A pleasure-dome is valueless without women, it might be said, yet the women here alluded to are types deriving from the history of the race. The female symbol is shown first as "wailing for her demon-lover," then as the "damsel with a dulcimer." These descriptions befit her two roles, as Lilith and Eve, as wild and yet tame. On a broader level, the female image has three main significances in "Kubla Khan": (1) She is the seductive type, relating to the so-called rebellious element in Nature; (2) she is the magna mater; (3) she connotes the so-called unknown damsel, or the anima of Jung. Of these, the second and third aspects are most prominent in the poem. Possibly the wailing woman refers to the folklorish concept of the lamia, but here she does not divert man from the path of evolution, though romantically she may have such hidden potentiality. The magna mater image stands out particularly. A recent article by the Swiss scholar (now at the Free University of Berlin) Richard Gerber sees affinity between the very name Kubla and the fertility goddess Cybele (though he has been questioned on this score by H. H. Meier). Toward the end of the poem, the speaker indicated that he would become the lover under the spell of the damsel's music, and could thus be inspired beyond human comprehension. Since the damsel is Black, the final love and inspiration suggests the harmony of integration. So the basically flawed theme is represented, not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to partake of the spiritual, and the dulcimer damsel becomes the Jungian anima but also das ewig Weibliche.

This spiritual harmony is symbolized in the poem in various ways. Such expressions as "meaningless to man," even "at once and ever," come to mind. The reconciliation of apparent opposites, a Coleridgean theme, is found most obviously in the allusions to the caverns and dome in close juxtaposition, thus relating the concave to the convex. There is also the harmony of sun and moon; that their significance is archetypal is suggested in that Roman emperors used these symbols specifically to signify eternal verities. Certain Roman coins, for example, show a girl holding the sun and moon in her hands as symbolic of the infinite. Similarly, in alchemical thought, eternity was considered obtainable only through the abolition of contraries and their final fusion, the alchemical Opus being designated a "conjunction." Consider also the close proximity in "Kubla Khan" of references to the holy and the pagan ("holy," "demon-"), to sunshine and ice, to Lilith as wailing woman and to Eve as dulcimer damsel. In general, then, the reconciliation of opposites is basic to the poem. The Abyssinian maid, moreover, reflects this need for reconciliation and stands as a symbol of it in her own way. She poses the need not only for spiritual integration on an abstract level, but for racial integration as well.

That Coleridge had race in mind when he wrote the poem is evident not just from his unconscious (which by its nature, I believe, is anti-racialist) but from the setting, which is not only Africa but primarily Tartary. The water imagery in the poem—for example, that the waves were the abode of dragons—may well point to standard Chinese symbolism. (Such a line as "Ancestral voices prophesying war!" may come to mind with the dragon image.) The dragon was said by the Chinese to come from the waves, not just because its undulating effect relates to serpentine symbolism (the dragon being a winged serpent), but because life has been said to originate from the waters. To be sure, water can suggest many other things, from amniotic fluid to the baptismal font, but in general it is the related to intuitive wisdom by the ancients, specifically the "abyss of water" which was said to signify the Unfathomable itself. The "sacred river" is then a divine flow throughout the religions of the world, integrating peoples, religions, and races. However, the term "sacred river" can also be misleading. Cirlot writes about sacred water as follows:

To quote Evola, in La tradizione ermetica: "Without divine water, nothing exists, according to Zosimus. On the other hand, among the symbols of the female principle are included those which figure as origins of the waters (mother, life), such as: Mother Earth, Mother of the Waters, Stone, Cave, House of the Mother, Night, House of Death, House of Force, House of Wisdom, Forest, etc." So when it is said that the word 'divine.' Water symbolizes terrestrial and natural life, never metaphysical life."
to mind. Indeed, enchantment itself has often been said to have a sylvan basis. A whole book, called The Enchanted Forest, has been written on "Kubla Khan" and Coleridge's allayed poetry.

Aside from standing for Nature's fructification, the forest may stand for the unconscious itself. And when a fountain was placed in the midst of vegetation, as in "Kubla Khan" with its hortus conclusus, Jung found it to be a symbol of the Selbst, or individuality.

Further, the forest imagery in "Kubla Khan" may relate to the African jungle. Such an unconscious leap from forest to jungle seems quite conceivable, the latter being only a wilder manifestation of what is implicit in the former. Since the forest is a standard symbol for the Female Principle (which in turn is identified with the unconscious), everything pertaining to the female in Coleridge's forest would likewise pertain to his Abyssinian maid in her "forest." That Coleridge had archetypical meaning like this in mind when he wrote the poem is evident enough from his phrase "forests ancient as the hills."

The extent of male-female polarity in "Kubla Khan" may demand a separate study. The principal male symbols are the "walls and towers" girdling the garden (aside from the Khan himself and the prophecies of war, which some consider a flaw in an otherwise idyllic vision). These structures are masculine because of their formal, man-created character. Frequently the wall image in literature suggests enclosure and hence frustration. To what extent is the poem about frustration? (Coleridge may have been frustrated in trying to finish it, but that seems irrelevant.) It does reveal frustration, to some degree, in that the final fusion is not attempted. The Abyssinian maid is longed for but not obtained. Norman Fruman thinks that the Abyssinian maid stands for the forbidding fear of miscegenation, but I am inclined to find that reading perverse. The basic disharmony in the poem is that the speaker cannot reach the 'Vision' of the dulcimer damsel and thereby become her spirit-lover. Though he is cut off from her, the inherent unconscious urge, a communal and anti-racist longing, persists. The poem's reconciliation of opposites has now come full circle, though we are not to think of white and black as 'opposites' except in the 'complementary' sense (or that of the color chart).

Still, the wall symbolism may be better understood from within rather than from without, as it were, as standing for protection at least as much as for frustration. For vigilance would indeed be demanded with the impending peril described by "Ancestral voices prophesying war!" The male-female polarity in "Kubla Khan" implies that there is no resolution from such outside opposition. What finally emerges as dominant is the image of the Khan Kubla, imperceptible and majestic, the masculine force presiding over Nature.

Are we not reminded of Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great proclaiming himself Great Lord of Africa?

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The present article is a revision of "Examining Xandu: 'Kubla Khan' Revisited," published at Calcutta University in a Festschrift for Professor Amalender Bose (1972-73).

FOOTNOTES

2. Coleridge, the Damaged Angel (New York, 1971).
7. All references to Coleridge are to the Nonesuch edition (ed. Stephen Potter).