Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Christabel” details the process of corruption undergone by an innocent young maiden, Christabel, on the brink of sexual maturity. The violence and corruption experienced by Christabel is also that which the Earth experiences; Coleridge’s poem presents the relationship between the often exploitive and characteristically male force of humanity and the oft feminized Earth. Humanity, in general, has a vexed relationship with mother Earth, viewing her as both seductively fertile land that can be used, and that which nurtures as a mother would. The pure and delicate Christabel is a female embodiment of the natural world who is corrupted through the seduction of Geraldine, a figure who arises out of Christabel’s anxieties and represents forces unnatural and not understood. Through examination under an ecofeminist lens, Christabel is viewed as the next in the long history of feminine figures, including the Earth, who experiences exploitation rather than an “ethics of care” espoused by ecofeminists; the ecofeminist lens thereby proven meritorious in its ability to give unique insight into the exploitation clearly present in this poem.

As a young maiden, Christabel is the human representation of the natural world. Through the duration of the poem, Christabel’s moments of contentment and serenity occur outside: Christabel is strikingly at ease in the middle of the woods at midnight, and it is there that she goes to pray and “kneels beneath the huge oak tree” (Coleridge, I. line 37). Thought by the Celts to be associated with natural deities who provide “the essence of assuredness, love, and care for her offspring” (The Goddess Tree), she seeks spiritual guidance before the oak tree, rather than in her room or at a family chapel, suggesting she has a deep spiritual connection with the natural world. Likened to a flower, something that is beautiful and passive, she is described as “so fair, so innocent, so mild”; she is a “gentle” or “sweet” maid. Yet, she is deliberately depicted as a
maiden filled with life, indicated by the narrator’s protest to call her face “fair not pale, and both
blue eyes more bright than clear” (Coleridge, ll. 272-274). This telling protest reveals the
narrator’s design to align Christabel with what is full of bright, fair life.

The spring period in which this poem is set also suggests a great connection with the
natural world. She herself is like the March night which embraces her: a promised maiden on the
brink of peak fertility. This sexual connection between the natural world and the feminine is
argued by Kate Soper who asserts that deeply entrenched in Western thought is “the double
association of women with reproductive activities and these in turn with nature” (Soper 139).
Yet, this association also indicates that both are at risk: virgin and virgin Earth are alike in that
they are viewed and categorized in patriarchal systems such as Western culture by their
ostensible inevitable submission to men. That, upon reproductive capacity, she is seized and
made into a good valuable to the father through her ability to be betrothed indicates a likeness to
the earth as both are seen as a commodity for male humanity. She is initiated into the culturally
dictated realm of womanhood synonymous with subjugation for the sake of utility, further
linking her with the earth. A woman is also nature conceived as spatial territory, as the land or
earth, which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (Soper 141). Christabel, on the brink of
womanhood, yearns to be nurtured and initiated into sexual maturity, which would belong to
herself, rather than coldly hoarded by a patriarchal figure such as her oppressive father.

Ecofeminist Karen Warren asserts that patriarchy is inherently linked to domination over the
non-male other through violence and/or oppression (Ecological Feminism, 179-180), which
contrasts to the “ethic of care” associated with the feminine involving an emotional sensitivity
and moral inclination for “practices of care associated with mothers, nursing, and friendship,”
(Ecofeminist Philosophy, 113). Clearly, Christabel looks for mother figures for care and
protection; she does not only seek solace before the mother-like oak tree, but upon hearing the alien stirrings in the woods she cries, “Mary Mother, save me now!” (Coleridge, I. 67-68). Christabel clearly searches for protection and care from a mother figure not a father figure, in her choice of deity from whom to entreat guardianship.

Without a physical nurturing mother figure present in her life though, Christabel’s sexual initiation is a precarious matter. While her mother is associated with the natural, evidenced through her wisdom of natural healing (Coleridge, II. 185-187), she survives now only as a ghostly reflection (199). This mother guardian exists only on the spiritual level; impotent to prevent harm from befalling Christabel (Coleridge, II. 199-200). Without this presence of care associated with both the mother and the mother earth and the feminine in general (Payne, 140-142), to give Christabel guidance, Christabel projects into creation a sparkling ethereal fellow maiden, Geraldine, in response to the tensions of sexual maturation in a context in which one may be exploited. Geraldine issues forth out of Christabel’s neurosis regarding her sexual maturity, a very rational anxiety regarding being initiated into this cycle of corruption in which she will be subjected to physical corruption, becoming used and viewed by men for her (re)productive capabilities, but also psychologically corrupt as she begins to absorb this view of the feminine as a commodity herself. That women—like nature—are viewed as property of men becomes evident to Christabel after her betrothal to “a knight,” a generic place holder of masculinity, which sparked Christabel’s anxieties.

Geraldine, though, is no nurturing mother-figure, but rather a female embodiment of the unnatural and corrupt. Critics such as Karen Swann, (9) Robbie Goh, (19) and Jonas Spatz (6), all conclude that Geraldine is Christabel’s alter ego of the unnatural, an embodiment of sin: the feminine corrupted, as Christabel will soon become. As an apparition that is described as
something of the Fairy World (Piper 4) or sometimes as a witch (Spatz 7), Geraldine is not of this Earth, be it heaven or hell. She is described as glittering and unnaturally bright and beautiful (Coleridge, I. line 60) like an angel. In addition, she possesses the ability to speak with the dead (203)—a very unnatural ability.

Instead of nurturing Christabel into feminine maturity, Geraldine initiates Christabel into a cycle of victimization. Geraldine claims to have been raped by five male persons of nobility (creating a relevant connection between land “owners” and exploitation) and exploits Christabel’s good nature and naïveté in that she seduces Christabel through taking advantage of her intrinsic maternal desire to take care of the victimized (Swann 3). Christabel hungers for the “ethics of care” associated with nurturing, friendship, and respect (Payne 140-142), and in her hunger to see this role fulfilled, she assumes it herself. In these acts, Christabel becomes a quasi-mother figure, and one which is already exploited. However, Christabel is like a flower growing in a greenhouse, a natural component imprisoned in artificiality. In so being, she does not only seek a connection with the natural world that is physical besides merely spiritual, but also has no notion of care through growing up in the cold, dark, almost Hades-like prison of her father’s castle (Coleridge, ll. 149-152), where “not a moonbeam enters” (Coleridge 170). Such an environment, Dennis Welsh contends, offers no security or privacy (4). The potent imagery of one of the many strange decorations of Christabel’s chambers, a lamp’s sculpture in which “twofold silver chain is fastened to an angel’s feet” (Coleridge I. 175-176), suggests the dark reality of Christabel’s living situation. She herself is a chained angel, a pure figure chained by patriarchal systems, oppressed physically—her confinement within the castle indicated through her fear to waken her father and alert him to her midnight wanderings out of doors (Coleridge I. 159-166)—but also psychologically through her fear. Both manners of oppression are present in
her inability to escape the role as reproductive other that has been forced upon her through her impending marriage.

Indeed, shackled to patriarchal modes of thought, Christabel falls victim into the cycle of masculinization of the feminine, an act which continues the cycle of patriarchy (Birkeland 20), and which is unnatural for women. While her feminine nature urges her to practice care, the nonexistence of a feminine model of authority for emulation in her life forces her to follow a patriarchal model; she is not alone, as according to ecofeminist critic Linda Vance, women are dictated by the patriarchal understanding of relations with others, as the feminine experience is rendered invisible, while the masculine is enforced as “real” (Vance 124). It is a different violence, which pulls women away from the innate connection between the feminine and the natural, as Karen Warren has noted that many spiritual ecofeminists contend exist (Ecofeminist Philosophy, 198). In becoming masculinized, Christabel is actively transgressing away from nature, corrupted into a system in which the feminine has very little value; she has no model for what care is, as she is orphaned and alone in a cold patriarchal system, which Warren argues has been also tied to violence instead of care (Ecofeminist Philosophy, 210).

Christabel carries the vulnerable Geraldine into the threshold (Coleridge, ll. 124-127) and leads her into her bedchambers (162-169), where the act of corrupting Christabel becomes fully engaged. Christabel is seduced by the promise of a return to a physical connection with the Earth and Mother, and thus is eager to make physical her connection to Geraldine. As Christabel is removed from the natural, she is enticed by its replacement, as Geraldine casts a spell upon Christabel (Coleridge, line 255). That Geraldine has not only corrupted Christabel, but has replaced her mother or “guardian spirit” (Coleridge, I. line 315) is evident when the narrator laments, “O sorrow and shame! Can this be she, / The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree? / And
Kristin E. Kawecki

lo! the worker of these harms, / That holds the maiden in her arms /… As a mother with her child,” (285-289). An embodiment of the sin against nature and the feminine incepted by patriarchal institutions, Geraldine is the mother of corruption: Christabel experiences a second birth in which she acquires a new identity as sexual commodity. Geraldine embodies the process of initiation into sexual maturity and womanhood in a patriarchal society; women, like the Earth, are viewed only by what they can offer to men in a (re)productive sense. That she does not nurture, but instead inflicts harm through initiation into the patriarchal system reifies her as a sinful character, as “the ability and necessity of care are part of what it means to be a moral agent, moral reasoner, moral decision maker,” (Warren, Ecofeminist Philosophy, 112); Geraldine is thus doubly immoral in that her choice to corrupt instead of care, is in itself a malignant act.

The full effects of this transgression by the unnatural upon the natural is manifested the next morning when Christabel presents Geraldine to her father Sir Leoline. Ostensibly, “weak in health” (Coleridge, I. line 114), Sir Leoline becomes enlivened in his desire to both protect and embrace Geraldine. The critic Robbie Goh, for one, argues that “Geraldine’s sexually-charged body, which takes the place of the spectral and disembodied mother-wife, stirs up acts of power within the lifeless and faded house-hold state” (20). The arrival of Geraldine indicates for Sir Leoline that his daughter has reached sexual maturity, and that she is in the process of becoming a woman under the patriarchal system that he dictates. The perhaps overly warm embrace Sir Leoline gives Christabel’s alter ego awakens Christabel to the reality that Geraldine is the embodiment of a subversive force; that, from henceforth, Christabel too will be seen as a commodity, which male persons—even her father—may exploit and condone the exploitation of. Sir Leoline while noticeably excited by the beauty of Geraldine (Coleridge, II. 387-391; 555), does not recognize her as an individual, but as the commodity belonging to another male, Sir
Roland; this reinforces Linda Vances argument, in which speaking for womankind in general, laments that “we are real only insofar as we are useful objects; our lives are inconsequential…at the same time the lives and experiences of those who do count are imposed upon the rest of us as ‘reality’ (Vance 124). This is yet further indication of Christabel’s impending commodification, since her alter-ego is recognized as an asset of reproductive belonging to another male, surely Sir Leoline perceives identity of his daughter to be similar to that of Geraldine, not an individual, but a possession of reproductive wealth belonging, in this case, to himself. Indeed, Geraldine completes the initiation of Christabel into the cycle of corruption in which she assumes the definition of woman under a patriarchal system through transferring a serpentine glance upon Christabel who cannot help, but also resemble this biblical symbol of sin (Coleridge, ll. 585-590).

This serpentine imagery is also present in the dream of the bard Bracy, in which a serpent coils around the neck of a dove (515-551). This imagery suggests the strangle of corruption upon the innocent, allegorical of the situation between the corrupting Gerladine and young Christabel. Sir Leoline, ostensibly duped by Geraldine’s powers as well, refuses to see that his daughter is at risk of corruption, and instead vows to protect the vehicle of corruption herself, crowing that “with arms more strong than harp or song,/thy sire and I will crush the snake!” (Coleridge, II. 558-559). Tellingly, his response to violence is through more violence, further evidencing the link between patriarchal systems and the furtherance of militarism, of the patriarchal with espousal of war and death, versus preservation and care for life and the living (Warren Ecofeminist Philosophy, 210).

However, there is an alternate to this violent model, as represented through the bard Bracy, as in response to his dreams he instead vows to live in nature with nature protecting the
innocent, in that he vows “to wander through the forest bare/lest aught unholy loiter there,”
(Coleridge, II. 550-551). Bracy represents an alternative to patriarchy in that he does not only
choose a model of care rather than violence, vowing not to seek vengeance, but instead follows a
model of care, living an ascetic life in the forest protecting the natural, here aligned with the
holy, from the unholy and the violent. He represents an alternative to patriarchal systems in that
he is a poet, rather than a knight—and thus associated with the emotional, rather than the violent.
His choice to live within nature, bare, indicates an alternative to patriarchal dominated society in
general. Under ecofeminist theory we can understand that the principles of care associated with
the feminine are not dualistic; ecofeminists believe that unlike patriarchal theories of power, this
model associated with the feminine is also accessible to men (Birkeland 21), as evidenced by the
bard Bracy. The link between Bracy in the natural world is further evinced in that the dream can
be viewed as a spiritual event in which Bracy has a connection with the ephemeral and nature-
aligned mother guardian spirit. His ability to connect with this mother spirit and see the truth in
his dream indicates that he is yet uncorrupted by patriarchal modes of seeing the world: he is still
receptive to (and thus protective of) the powers of the feminine and natural. That men do not
have to follow exploitive behaviors is further indicated in that Sir Leoline directs Bracy to take
care of Geraldine, while he initiates a chase with Sir Roland after her supposed violators.
Interestingly, while Christabel may want to live as Bracy does, in harmony with the natural,
initiated into a natural system in which she is a free individual instead of a confined commodity,
patriarchal dictated culture restricts her. Thus, even while Bracy may have the freedom to
remove himself from a patriarchal society and instead in connection with the natural, this is
because he is male, and he is viewed as an individual rather than as reproductive male possession
(Vance 124). Christabel is forced into a system in which she must be betrothed and must assume
the role of woman as defined by a patriarchal system, while Bracy can enjoy the freedom to “wander through the forest bare,” (Coleridge II. Line 550), without fear of sexual violation. As Geraldine departs, Spatz argues, she has merged with Christabel indicating that she is now fully “a woman” under a patriarchal system (10). Thus, Christabel, who is both innocent and connected with nature through her reproductive abilities, has too become an embodiment of sin.

The relevance of ecofeminism in the examination of this tale of patriarchal domination over the young and blossoming Christabel is undoubtable, as, according to Linda Vance, the feminine, embodied as both the female individual and the earth, shares a common oppression in that “we were perceived as the known and shaped objects in a world where the knowers and shapers are men. This is precisely the oppression we share with the nonhuman world, and why, as ecofeminists, we assert that the domination of women and the domination of the natural go hand in hand,” (Vance 133). With an ecofeminist perspective, this tale gives us great insight to the harm and violence innate to a patriarchal system, largely in part due to its corruption of the feminine models of care. Indeed, it is implied that Christabel’s tragic tale is just one of many: the narrator forebodingly implies that this tale is one that includes all of humanity in the last stanza in which an anonymous male figure lurks, while a nameless nymph innocently frolics: he symbolizing the patriarchal bodies of oppression, while she stands as a universal figure for the nature aligned, and sexually desirable maiden. The invisible presence of what Geraldine represents lurks as well, as under the view of patriarchy the maiden is viewed not as individual, but has become a sexual and reproductive good; both the masculine and the feminine are corrupted in the active choice to exploit.
Works Cited


