

# English Studies

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## KUBLA KHAN: THE INFLUENCE OF BURGER'S *LENORE*<sup>1</sup>

Although many critics have noted parallels between Burger's *Lenore* and Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, none appears to have noticed any parallel between *Lenore* and *Kubla Khan*.

A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

(italics added)

The present contention is that the image evoked in the lines italicized was inspired by Coleridge's reading of *Lenore*. This is to say that *Lenore* became digested in what John Livingston Lowes so aptly calls Coleridge's 'deep well',<sup>2</sup> and that when writing *Kubla Khan*, his imagination threw up a distillation of the poem as a whole as this single compressed image. For, a woman wailing for her demon-lover beneath a waning moon is virtually a summary — both in principal details and atmosphere — of Burger's ballad. *Lenore* was first published in 1774, in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach*;<sup>3</sup> yet, more than twenty years were to elapse before it received sudden literary interest and acclaim in England. In 1796, no less than five translations were published — by Pye (the Poet Laureate), Stanley, William Spencer, Taylor and Scott — all of which were reviewed in *The British Critic* (vol. VIII., p. 256ff.) the same year.

The impact of *Lenore* is described by Scott in a note made later to his own translation of the poem which he entitled 'William and Helen':

The celebrated ballad of 'Lenoré' [sic], by Burger, was about this time introduced into England; and it is remarkable, that, written as far back as 1775 [sic], it was upwards of twenty years before it was known in Britain, though calculated to make so strong an impression. The wild character of the tale was such as struck the imagination of all who read it, although the idea of the lady's ride behind the spectre horseman had been long before hit upon by an English ballad-maker.<sup>4</sup>

This last observation refers to the ballad 'Sweet William's Ghost' in *Percy's Reliques*; but Scott goes on to qualify any comparison that might be drawn between that ballad and Burger's:

<sup>1</sup> The text of *Lenore* referred to here may be found in *The Harrap Anthology of German Poetry*, ed. A. Closs and T. Pugh Williams (London, 1957), pp. 191-9. *Lenore* may also be found, with a prose translation, in *The Penguin Book of German Verse*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Road to Xanadu*, John Livingston Lowes (London, 1927), ch. iii.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, Henry and Mary Garland, Oxford, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (Oxford Univ. Press, 1909), p. 650.

But this pretended English original, if in reality it be such, is so dull, flat, and prosaic, as to leave the distinguished German author all that is valuable in his story, by clothing it with a fanciful wildness of expression, which serves to set forth the marvellous tale in its native terror.<sup>5</sup>

Scott's remarks are pertinent, particularly his distinction between the 'dull, flat, and prosaic' nature of 'Sweet William's Ghost', and the 'fanciful wildness of expression' and 'native terror' of *Lenore*. For it was certainly these characteristics of Burger's poem which made 'so strong an impression' on, and 'struck the imagination' of Coleridge. Coleridge bought a two-volume edition of Burger in September, 1798, when he was in Germany;<sup>6</sup> but he had clearly read *Lenore* prior to this purchase, and prior to his writing *The Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*.<sup>7</sup> Although there is no reference to *Lenore* or Burger in his *Biographia Literaria*, a letter written to Taylor from London in 1800 reports a discussion between Wordsworth and Coleridge (which took place by letter while they were in Germany), on the relative merits of Taylor's translation and Burger's original. The following passage illustrates Coleridge's familiarity with, and critical probity of, both the original and the translation:

I admitted in my reply [ie. to Wordsworth], that there are more passages of poetry in your translation, but affirmed that it wanted the *rapidity* and *oneness* of the original; and that in the beauty quoted [ie. 'The bridges thunder as they pass, / But earthly sound was none, &c., &c.,'] the idea was so striking, that it made me *pause, stand still* and *look*, when I ought to have been driving on with the horse. Your choice of metre I thought unfortunate, and that you had lost the spirit of quotation from the Psalm-book, which gives such dramatic spirit and feeling to the dialogue between the mother and daughter.<sup>8</sup>

Such criticism is illuminating. Coleridge's '*rapidity*', '*oneness*', 'dramatic spirit' and 'feeling' suggest, as do Scott's expressions, that above all else, it was the energy, atmosphere and totality of *Lenore* that gave the poem its peculiar quality. That Taylor, in Coleridge's view, had failed to capture this quality lends weight to the point: his attention to detail — to the impressiveness of episode, rather than to the overall effect, — arrested the poem in its flight, forcing Coleridge to '*pause, stand still* and *look*' at points of singular interest, and thereby preventing him from being caught up in the general atmosphere of the poem as a whole.

In order to establish the present argument, it is necessary to detail briefly the more evocative passages of Burger's poem.

The first three stanzas introduce Lenore's yearning and impatience for Wilhelm, and her hysterical behaviour when he does not materialize. The 'dialogue' of which Coleridge speaks, occupies the next seven stanzas (sts. iv-x). The consolation which her mother offers her is of a strictly religious character; but Lenore rejects it. Religion is delusion and, without Wilhelm, life is futile: all

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols. (London, 1957), I. 340.

<sup>7</sup> Lowes, ch. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956-71), I. 565.

she desires, ironically as it happens, is death. Twice she repeats: 'Lisch aus, mein licht, auf ewig aus! / Stirb hin, stirb hin in Nacht und Graus!' (sts. ix, xi) — which prayer is immediately answered by the arrival of Wilhelm (st. xiii). To her mother's final remonstrance, Lenore replies:

'O Mutter! was ist Seligkeit?  
O Mutter! was ist Hölle?  
Bei ihm, bei ihm ist Seligkeit,  
Und ohne Wilhelm Hölle! ...  
Ohn' ihn mag ich auf Erden,  
Mag dort nicht selig werden.'

(st. xi)

The essential point to note here is that Wilhelm displaces God, earthly passion spiritual devotion, and an earthly paradise true Heaven. Burger himself points a moral; what Lenore is guilty of is hubristic pride:

So wütete Verzweiflung  
Ihr in Gehirn und Adern.  
*Sie fuhr mit Gottes Vorsehung*  
*Vermessen fort zu hadern,*  
Zerschlug den Busen und zerrang  
Die Hand bis Sonnenuntergang,  
Bis auf am Himmelsbogen  
Die goldnen Sterne zogen.

(italics added) (st. xii)

This stanza succinctly unites Lenore's 'presumptuous' railing against 'God's Providence' with her extreme and impassioned distractedness, whilst moving us from the day-time into the night (the moonlit world of Godlessness and Death). Significantly, it is at this moment that the 'trapp, trapp, trapp' of the horse announces Wilhelm's arrival (st. xiii). A brief dialogue is exchanged between the two: Lenore raises some objections to their immediate departure (cf. *The Ballad of the Dark Ladie*, 41-8), before she submits. During the ride, which takes place within the space of nine stanzas (sts. xx-xxviii), the following, or a very close variation of it, is the only exchange that occurs between them. It is repeated three times:

'Graut Liebchen auch? ... Der Mond scheint hell!  
Hurra, die Toten reiten schnell;  
Graut Liebchen auch vor Toten?' —  
'Ach laß sie ruhn, die Toten!'

(st. xxiv)

Of course, Lenore is unaware of the irony of her reply. This quatrain acts as an insistent refrain, evoking an atmosphere in which death, fear and the moon are inextricably associated. Indeed, between stanzas xvii and xxix, 'fear' is mentioned six times, the 'moon' or 'moonshine' seven times, and 'the Dead' eleven times; and these occur in such close proximity as to form an inseparable nucleus.

The two groups involved in some sort of death ritual, whom they encounter



during their ride, — the funeral procession (sts. xxi-xxiii: notice the part played by music and song), and the 'airy gang' dancing round the axle of a wheel beside a gibbet (st. xxv), — instinctively obey Wilhelm's summons to follow him because they recognize him as their leader; that is, they know he is Death. (Perverted rendition of the Scriptures, and shades of Anti-Christ are all too evident).

But it is only when they reach their destination, the graveyard, just as dawn is breaking, that Wilhelm is revealed to Lenore as Death (st. xxx, cf. *Christabel*, 245-254: the same lines which gave Shelley a paroxysm that night in Switzerland in 1816).

In the final stanza, the spirits dance around Lenore wailing out the essential moral of the whole poem:

Nun tanzten wohl bei Mondenglanz  
Rundum herum im Kreise  
Die Geister einen Kettentanz  
Und heulten diese Weise:  
'Geduld! Geduld! Wenn's Herz auch bricht!  
Mit Gott im Himmel hadre nicht!  
Des Leibes bist du ledig:  
Gott sei der Seele gnädig!'

To recall the image with which we started: a woman wailing for her demon-lover beneath a waning moon. Now, Lenore's wailing and yearning, which invokes at once her lover and Death in the same person; her desire for an earthly paradise, and her pride and defiance of God when this does not materialize; the ubiquitous moon, and the repetitive death-fear-moon motif, strongly suggest that *Lenore* lies behind Coleridge's image.

However, the influence of *Lenore* on *Kubla Khan* may go further. The final stanza above bears some resemblance to the closing six lines of Coleridge's poem:

Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

The weaving of a circle (cf. the dance in st. xxv and in the final stanza), the exclamation 'Beware! Beware!' which, as is the similarly twice repeated 'Geduld!' ('Patience'), is a disyllabic iambus, and more than anything the use of direct speech, suggest a parallel in form — if not strictly in content — between both poems' endings. (Both endings may also owe some debt to the witches' ritual in *Macbeth*: Burger himself had translated the play into German). Moreover, a comparison of the whole structure of *Lenore* with that of *Kubla Khan* yields a certain similarity between the two. The measured motion at the outset of *Kubla Khan*, which builds up into the wild frenzy of torrents, paradoxes, ecstatic vision and the concluding incantation, resemble closely the ini-

tial narrative control in *Lenore*, which is followed by the surrender to despair, the wild ride, the revelation to Lenore of Wilhelm as Death, and its final incantation. We might also note the part which song and dance play in the latter part of both poems, and that both end on a note of admonition.

Finally, in both poems the protagonists have, through their hubristic challenge to the natural order of God, released energies which alienate them from their fellow beings and over which, eventually, they find they have no control. What promised to be creative, proves to be destructive — ultimately, self-destructive.

It is conceivable therefore, that Burger's *Lenore* not only suggested to Coleridge's imagination the composite image with which we began, but also influenced the pattern or structure of *Kubla Khan*.

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