“THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER” AS STYLIZED EPIC

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The many scholars and critics who have so variously interpreted “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” agree at least that Coleridge has charged his simple ballad form with a strange but uniquely evocative verbal magic and has transformed the superficial sensationalism of the “Gothic” ballad into an impressive if elusive coherence. In this paper I wish to suggest that much of “The Ancient Mariner’s” verbal witchery and “archetypal” significance arises from qualities of the poem which are closely analogous to those of the “quest” epic, and that these qualities are what distinguish “The Ancient Mariner” from poems of comparable length and with similarly “magical” subjects. In “The Ancient Mariner” the essence of one kind of epic is given compact expression through symbolic narrative.

In theme, surely, “The Ancient Mariner” is epical. However we interpret the poem, we must recognize that it deals with fundamental problems of good and evil, with near-universal human experience. Robert Penn Warren, for example, in his thoroughgoing interpretation of “The Ancient Mariner” finds two central and interlocked themes: that of establishing the “sacramental vision” of the universe as “One Life,” and that of dramatizing the nature of the creative imagination.\(^1\) Maud Bodkin regards the poem as an artistic embodiment of the archetypal experience of “rebirth,” a psychic event that is so common that its results “are inherited in the structure of the brain.”\(^2\) Solomon Gingerich finds the poem to be an argument for the acceptance of a “necessitarian” view of the universe,\(^3\) and C. M. Bowra believes that “The Ancient Mariner” analyzes the essential nature and meaning of crime and punishment.\(^4\)

At any rate, if the Mariner is not forced into the perception of a new vision of the universe, he at least returns from his sufferings,

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in the fashion of epic heroes, with a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the human situation than he had embarked with. Indeed, what primarily distinguishes “The Ancient Mariner” from the many ballads of the supernatural which might otherwise claim kinship to it is the exclusiveness of its concentration—despite the extent and vivacity of its “miraculous” elements—upon human action and human values. At stake always amidst a natural world animated by superhuman spiritual creatures is the Mariner’s essential humanity, just as in The Iliad Homer’s primary concern in a world of bestial carnage ruled by capricious gods is the humanity of Achilles.

More specifically, “The Ancient Mariner” is reminiscent of the “epic of quest,” a sub-type for which G. R. Levy has provided a concise definition.

Its heroes fight chiefly in solitude, against demons who oppose their progress, ‘monsters of their spirit’s making.’ If they start their journey with companions, they lose them on the way... They always cross the sea and meet women on strange shores who enchant or prophesy... they navigate the waters of death to learn their destiny.⁵

The most familiar epic of this type is, of course, The Odyssey, and I want to point out some unremarked similarities between that poem and “The Ancient Mariner.” In doing so, however, I will refer also to the less well known Gilgamesh, a Babylonian epic, probably composed about 2000 B.C.,⁶ which is available to American readers in a lively and readable form thanks to the verse translation of William Ellery Leonard of the University of Wisconsin. The Odyssey is a highly sophisticated poem of complex and unusual origins with some ambiguous, or at least debatable, purposes,⁷ and it does not so readily as the more primitive and uncomplicated Gilgamesh display the characteristics of the “quest” epic in their purest form. Furthermore, it is parallels and analogies I am suggesting, not influences, and Coleridge could not have known Gilgamesh, for it was not published in Europe until 1872.⁸

The first twenty lines of “The Ancient Mariner” serve as a kind of introduction to the story:

⁵ G. R. Levy, The Sword from the Rock, London, 1951, p. 120.
⁶ Alexander Heidel, The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels, Chicago, Second Edition, 1949, pp. 14–16. Without doubt the most literate translation of Gilgamesh is Leonard’s. But Leonard seldom goes beyond the Old Babylonian version, and therefore misses a good deal that is found in the Sumerian, Assyrian, Hittite, and Hurrian versions. Heidel’s translation, though uninspired, is based on a collation of all available texts, so I use it and all references are to it.
⁸ Heidel, op. cit., p. 2.
It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me? . . .

He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.\(^9\)

Three interrelated characteristics of the Mariner are insisted upon in this introductory scene: his age (he has experienced much), his glittering eye (he has seen strange things), and the power of his will. Coleridge dramatizes those characteristics of the Mariner which the author of Gilgamesh describes at the opening of his epic as of central significance to his hero.

He who saw everything, of him learn, O my land;
He who knew all the lands, him will I praise . . .
He saw secret things and obtained knowledge of hidden things.
He went on a long journey and became weary and worn;
He engraven on a tablet of stone all the travail.\(^{10}\)

Compare, too, the opening lines of The Odyssey.

This is the story of a man, one who was never at a loss. He had travelled far in the world . . . he endured many troubles and hardships in the struggle to save his own life and to bring back his men safe to their homes. He did his best, but he could not save his companions. For they perished by their own madness, because they killed and ate the cattle of Hyperion the Sun-God, and the god took care that they should never see home again.\(^{11}\)

We may note that one of Odysseus' most destructive antagonists is named at once as the god of the sun. Gilgamesh, too, has difficulties with a sun god,\(^{12}\) and several critics have pointed out that the Mariner's disasters occur under the "aegis of the sun" and his beneficent experiences under the "aegis of the moon."\(^{13}\) In other words, the primary symbolic structure of Coleridge's poem parallels a basic motif of the quest epic: the "night journey," restoration through descent into the realms of darkness.

We observe, also, that The Odyssey's introduction stresses the importance of returning home, returning to all the activities and

\(^{10}\) Heidel, Tablet I, column i, p. 16.
\(^{12}\) Heidel, III, v, p. 38. For the beneficence of the moon see IX, i, p. 66. The clarity of this point is obscured by the overlapping functions of the gods Anu, Enlil, Ea, and Shamash. See VII, i, p. 56 and Heidel's note (113) on that page.
\(^{13}\) Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, Baton Rouge, 1941, p. 24 ff.
satisfactions that "home" implies. The same stress is apparent in *Gilgamesh*, where, immediately succeeding the lines I have quoted, the reader is given a description of Uruk, the city from which Gilgamesh departs on his strange pilgrimage and to which, after his return "a sadder and a wiser man," he dedicates his life.

He built the wall of Uruk, the enclosure
Of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.
Behold its outer wall, whose brightness is like that of copper!
Yea, look upon its inner wall, which none can equal!
Take hold of the threshold, which is from of old! . . .
Climb upon the wall of Uruk and walk about;
Inspect the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork.\(^\text{14}\)

The wedding scene which opens and closes "The Ancient Mariner" is symbolically equivalent of Uruk and Ithaca. The Mariner does not disrupt this most primary of social and domestic festivities, but the shadow of his weird experience falls across its gaiety, just as the trials of Gilgamesh and Odysseus throw into a more profound perspective the middle-class solidity and comfort of Uruk and the bourgeois contentment of Odysseus' island palace.

Finally, observe that "The Mariner hath his will." Coleridge's ancient sailor does not, to be sure, have the *mēnis* of an Achilles, the violent wilfulness of Gilgamesh, but when he commands the Wedding-Guest to listen that "gallant" "cannot choose but hear." The Mariner wantonly shoots the albatross. When the spectre-ship appears he is the man who bites his arm and sucks his blood in order to cry out. When he falls into the Pilot's boat and the Pilot's boy "doth crazy go" the Mariner seizes the oars. Finally, his "O shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man!" to the tottering Hermit rings more of command than of prayer. This is not, certainly, the divinely wilful pride of Gilgamesh, who

... leaves no son to his father, day and night his outrageousness continues unrestrained;
And he is the shepherd of Uruk, the enclosure;
He is their shepherd, and yet he oppresses them. . . .
Gilgamesh leaves no virgin to her lover,
The daughter of a warrior, the chosen of a noble.\(^\text{15}\)

But the difference between Gilgamesh and the Mariner is one of degree, not of kind. It can be said of Coleridge's poem as truly as of *Gilgamesh* or the Homeric epics that

The deepest significance of each of these archetypal masterpieces lies in the reduction of ... pride by means of a bereavement which imposes the recognition of a common humanity.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Heidel, I, i, p. 17.
\(^{15}\) Heidel, I, ii, p. 18.
\(^{16}\) Levy, op. cit., p. 124.
The Mariner’s ship, driven by a storm, at first travels South to the lands of ice and snow and then sails North into the tropical Pacific. The cause of this reversal is the Mariner’s catastrophic act (which occurs just after he has won through terrible perils, as is the case with both Odysseus and Gilgamesh) of shooting the albatross, an act which parallels the slaying of the Sun-God’s oxen in *The Odyssey* and the destruction of the Bull of Heaven in *Gilgamesh*. The shooting of the Albatross leads to the death of the Mariner’s shipmates, even as the slaughter of the oxen entails the destruction of Odysseus’ companions and the killing of the Bull of Heaven results in the loss of Gilgamesh’s one comrade. After these critical acts all three heroes undergo a period of terrible isolation, an isolation especially poignant because filled with beauty, but an inhuman beauty. Gilgamesh finds his way into an Eden-like garden where

The carnelian bears its fruit;
Vines hang from it, good to look at.
The lapis-lazuli bears foliage;
Also fruit it bears, pleasant to behold.  

Odysseus, constrained by the love of the radiant Calypso, is offered the pleasures of her delightful island and the gift of eternal youth. The Mariner, it is true, finds in the weird beauty of the water snakes the means to begin his resurrection. But, like Odysseus and Gilgamesh, he needs supernatural assistance to effect his release—“Sure my kind saint took pity on me.” And, like the other two heroes, the Mariner’s most desolate moment of isolation is that instant in which the remote, inscrutable loneliness of the night heavens sinks into his soul.

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest and their native country and their own natural home, which they enter unannounced as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is silent joy at their arrival.

Like Gilgamesh and Odysseus the Mariner is brought back to his native land in a tranced condition and by a vessel supernaturally propelled. The importance of sleep and of prophetic visions throughout “The Ancient Mariner” is paralleled by a similar emphasis in both of the earlier epics. And when the Mariner

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17 It has not been remarked so far as I know how Coleridge dramatizes the change in the Mariner’s situation from hunter to hunted by means of two “mirror” similies. Cf. 11. 45–50 and 11. 442–451.
18 Heidel, IX, v. p. 68.
20 There is, indeed, a curious analogue in *Gilgamesh* to the two voices which the Mariner hears discussing his fate on his homeward voyage. When Gilgamesh, who must stay awake for six days to conquer death, falls asleep, Utnapishtim, the god
arrives safe if shaken at his home port, his ship sinks magically, even as the ship of Alcinous which carries Odysseus home is destroyed by Poseidon. And if the Mariner’s return does not result in the terrific bloodshed caused by Odysseus’ homecoming, its effect is far from pleasant. The hermit can scarcely stand, the Pilot falls in a fit, and the Pilot’s boy “doth crazy go.” And then, like The Odyssey and Gilgamesh, “The Ancient Mariner” concludes with a kind of epilogue which seems unnecessary and not in keeping with the tone of the rest of the poem.

O sweeter than the marriage-feast,
’Tis sweeter far to me
To walk together to the kirk
With a godly company!—

To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his great father bends,
Old men and babes, and loving friends
And youths and maidens gay...

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.²¹

It is primarily the stylistic flatness of these final verses, I believe, which has led many commentators to reject their explicit “moral” as an expression of the true inner meaning of “The Ancient Mariner.”²² Their weakness may, however, parallel the awkwardness of the notorious twenty-fourth book of The Odyssey, where, to quote one critic,

there is an inevitable slackening of tension, discernible in the verse, because this... book entails a tying up of all remaining threads after the drama of the return has been accomplished.²³

Even more illuminating, it seems to me, is the analogue of Gilgamesh, wherein the hero has explicitly rejected the temptation of a mere unthinking life of sensuous enjoyment (perhaps implied to the Mariner by the wedding-feast).

who conducts the trial, remarks scornfully: “Look at the strong man who wants life everlasting.” His wife, however, answers gently: “Touch him that the man may awake,/ That he may return in peace on the road by which he came.” And later she persuades Utanapadim to reveal a secret of the gods to the broken-hearted hero, because “Gilgamesh has come hither, he has become weary, he has exerted himself.” In Coleridge’s words: The other was a softer voice,/ As soft as honey-dew;/ Quoth he: the man hath penance done,/ And penance more will do.

²³ Levy, op. cit., p. 156.
Thou, O Gilgamesh, let thy belly be full;
Day and night be thou merry;
Make every day a day of rejoicing.
Day and night do thou dance and play.
Let thy raiment be clean,
Thy head be washed, and thyself bathed in water.
Cherish the little one holding thy hand,
And let thy wife rejoice in thy bosom.24

This divine advice Gilgamesh refuses. Although he ultimately comes to accept the limitations of human life and to value the simple material and social virtues of his city, he does not deceive himself as to the pain inherent in the human condition. Like the Mariner, whose “agony returns,” Gilgamesh, after his difficult journey and painful return must descend to hell and learn for the benefit of his people the fate of his hard-won wisdom and humanity.

“Tell me, my friend; tell me, my friend;
Tell me the ways of the underworld which thou has seen.”
“I will not tell thee, my friend; I will not tell thee.
But if I must tell thee the ways of the underworld which I have seen,
Sit down and weep.”25

Compared to this saddest and bitterest of conclusions, Coleridge’s

He went like one that hath been stunned,
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.26

may seem trivial, but the purpose and meaning of the two epilogues are manifestly the same.

The parallels which I have suggested between “The Ancient Mariner” and The Odyssey and Gilgamesh are, I believe, valid, and more detailed analogies could be enumerated.27 But is there any value in finding this kind of similarity? Do such parallelisms explain anything about “The Ancient Mariner?” If one reads Coleridge’s poem as an epic of quest, condensed into symbolic form of course, one discovers the explanation for certain otherwise rather baffling qualities of “The Ancient Mariner.”

For example, such a reading explains why the poem, so dangerously tinged by the artificial supernaturalism of the worst romantic horror-mongering, is charged with such coherent symbolic significance. According to this reading, the poem’s language, metaphoric structure, and organization of incidents and scenic details are all determined by a unified total design which is epic, a design, that is,

24 Heidel, X, iii, p. 70.
25 Heidel, XII, i, p. 98.
27 For example, the symbolic significance of forests and trees to each of these poems so profoundly concerned with the sea.
as profound, meaningful, and evocative as literature is capable of. Is not the “magic” of “The Ancient Mariner” the feelings we experience when we finish reading the poem, feelings different in degree from our response to other poems, lyric, elegiac, or purely narrative, of equal brevity and apparent simplicity?

Moreover, a reading of “The Ancient Mariner” as a stylized epic of quest illuminates the meaning and purpose of Coleridge’s extensive revisions of the poem, particularly his addition of the prose gloss. In general, Coleridge in reworking the poem reduced rather than expanded. As has been observed, he consistently modified or deleted the sensational features of his early version, e.g., the arms of the seraphs burning like torches, toning down those elements most immediately reminiscent of the supernaturalism of the “horror” ballads. The character of the Mariner Coleridge stylized, discarding his more “quaint” and ludicrous aspects. He reduced to an essential minimum the purely balladic formulae which had predominated in the original poem. He tended to retain those formulae—phrases like, “To Mary Queen the praise be given,” “mine own countree,” repetitions like “Water, water, every where,” and internal rhyme—which are not so specifically balladic as suggestive of the generic qualities of popular literature. All of Coleridge’s revisions of the verse can be understood as efforts to emphasize the symbolic and universal aspect of his poem and to de-emphasize the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies inherent in his ballad original.

His one major addition, the prose gloss, not only provides an extra temporal dimension, but also supplies a perspective of sophistication. It is an artistic device which serves to make the “primitiveness” of the verse immediately and vigorously available to the civilized reader. The naïveté, linguistic and intellectual of the “learned” prose commentator is about mid-way between the “barbaric” naïveté of the poem and the sophistication of the modern reader. The gloss functions as a medium of transmission.

But the gloss bears a more dynamic relation to the versification. It enriches the apparent simplicity of the brief verse narrative by making the totality of the poem a complex interplaying of prose and verse forces. The gloss, being prose, asserts rhythms, musical, emotional, dramatic, different from those of the verse. Sometimes the prose retards the movement of the poetry, thus emphasizing the continuity of symbolic elements. Occasionally Coleridge uses the

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28 The fullest discussion of Coleridge’s emendations is to be found in the article of B. R. McElderry, Jr., “Coleridge’s Revision of ‘The Ancient Mariner,’” Studies in Philology, XXIX, 1932, pp. 68-96.
29 Ibid., p. 89.
32 See 11. 103-106.
gloss to accelerate the pace of the verse, sometimes by foreshadowing.\textsuperscript{33} And, though usually the gloss is more literal than the verse, at times the prose evokes a richer imaginative context than the poetry, as in the passage depicting the Mariner’s yearning toward the moon. And all these complications of texture provide “The Ancient Mariner” with evocative overtones which cannot be created in lyrical or simple narrative poems but which are the essential and characteristic feature of epic poetry.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} Good examples are 11. 119–128 and 164–170.
\textsuperscript{34} Neither Coleridge nor any of his contemporaries ever suggested that “The Ancient Mariner” was an epic. Could Coleridge have written a stylized epic without being conscious of doing so? Investigations of his attitude toward “popular” literature will show, I believe, that he could have, but limitations of space forbid a discussion of this important matter here.