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Symbolism and Imagination in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's '*Kubla Kahn*' and their relationship to the Design of an Oriental Garden – The Prince Regent's Royal Pavilion

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In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

There is a lack of a direct reference to the poem 'Kubla Kahn' in Coleridge's note books and journals in the late 1790s and the disclaimer in the 1816 Preface (the 'Crewe manuscript' version) refers to the poem as the product of the poet's 'psychological curiosity' (1993, p. 203). It is already known that the self-conscious and historical fabrication, the imagistic attention to the construct of orientalism, point towards a multiplicity of influences on the poem's creation including (but not limited to) Southey, Shelley, Marco Polo, Dante Purchas, Vishnu and Banks.ⁱ This article contends that the iambic dreamwork of Coleridge's 'incantatory elevation' were not only product of the interaction of Coleridge's hypersensitive imagination with the Devonshire and Lake-district British landscapes of his youth. They were also a product of the socio-political cultural climate of British society in the 1790s and early 1800s, represented symbolically in the architecture of the Prince Regents Royal Pavilion.ⁱⁱ

Keywords

Coleridge; 'Kubla Kahn'; The Royal Pavilion; Orientalism; Imagination.

Introduction

Hazlitt's review of the 1816 volume containing Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn' opined that 'Mr Coleridge can write better nonsense verses than any man in England' (1816/1999, p. 31). The poem 'Kubla Kahn' has repeatedly been described as a 'dream fragment' or a 'musical composition'. However, this revelatory ethereal quality of the poem had a psychological and pharmacological basis. Coleridge himself recorded that the poem had been composed "in a sort of Reveries brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock & Linton, a quarter of a mile from . . . Culbone Church, in the fall of the year 1797" (1993, p. 206). As Fulford and Lee (2002) have noted from Coleridge's notebooks, Opium was supplied through the oriental trade routes by Sir Joseph Banks, explorer, naturalist, confident of ministers and monarchs. He would later become the President of the British royal Society. Coleridge experimented with opiates (as did his contemporaries), and it was under the drugs influence that he penned "Kubla Khan" (pp. 118-119). This paper argues for the place of confluence between the poet's opiate use, his romantic attachments to the Devonshire/Lake District of his childhood and the resemblances of the Prince Regents Royal Pavilion to the poets imagistic attention to the construct of the orientalism of the day.

Opium induced imagination

In a letter from Banks to Coleridge of 17 February 1803, Banks gives Coleridge the provenance of the Opium drug, used medicinally already in the late 1700s by Coleridge.

The Bang, you ask for, is the powder of the Leaves of a kind of Hemp [term for the dried poppy nectar] that grows in Hot Climates. It is prepared, and used . . . in all parts of the East, from Morocco to China. In Europe, it is found to act very differently on different Constitutions. Some it elevates in the extreme: others it renders torpid and scarcely observant of any evil that may befall them (*Collected Letters 2*, pp. 933-34).

Thus the etiolated languor of the poetical expression released in 'Kubla Kahn' had an intoxicatory pharmacological origin. As Leask suggests, there is thus is a gulf between the Coleridge of the late 1790s, 'climacteric and revolutionary', and the more conservative literary figure and moralist of the early eighteenth century (1998, p. 2). The gulf between the innocent sensualism of Coleridge's earlier letters and poems and the visionary torpor of his later poems may have inspired his later conservatism. If this line of reasoning is correct, then opiate use both stimulated the symbolism of his imagination and later sobered his literary-political views.

One might speculate that the opiate use signifies a transporting device between Coleridge's earlier revelatory poetics, the more innocent Devonshire childhood and later more conservative literary politics. Perhaps this is because, as Perkins points out, opium was ". . . an 'anodyne' [which] has been prescribed for an illness and had the profound effect . . . because . . . Coleridge was not used to the drug" (2010, p. 39). In 'Kubla Kahn', what can only be described as the 'intimate urgency' of Coleridge's revelatory sequestering of imagistic grandeur in nature conjures an image of the poet philosopher as majestic creator – a solitary figure of wealth and ingénue, a figure who understands and stands in history, a figure of culture and politics, a figure of post-colonial regency. As Leask states, "Coleridge's 1816 Preface to Kubla Kahn, by focusing readerly attention on the agency of the drugged imagination as a syncretising power, erases the geopolitical distinction between the poem's constituent *topoi*" (2001, p. 3). These *topoi*, or rhetorical commonplaces, are a confection of Coleridge's youthful experiences in Devonshire nature, his reflection on the role of poetical agency, and an essentialised regency orientalism. As Fulford explains:

In 'Kubla Kahn', the details are apparently specific but ultimately unmappable. This disturbing blend of geographic exactitude and generic exoticism is not just a way of setting a moral tale in a notional East, but an essential part of the *modus operandi*: as Xanadu slips off the map into a 'vision in a dream' the cultural function in Europe of imagining a fantasy Orient is brought into focus (2006, p. 118).

However, this focus was also a form of sublime detachment by the poet.

Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn' and orientalism

Orientalism was a voguish word for the stylistic influences of the East on the British imagination. In Coleridge's poetry and notebooks early sources of inspiration for Coleridge's Regency interpretation of orientalism include Sir George Staunton's *An Authentic Account of an embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China. . . taken from the papers of . . . the Earl of McCartney* (1797) and James Bruce's 3,000 page epic *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790). These were contemporaneous works that expressed British perceptions of Eastern influence. Other influences include *Purchas His Pilgrims*, Southey's *Thalaba*, Jones translation of *Shakuntala*, a play by the fifth-century South Asian author Kalidasa, and the first Indian author in English, Dean Mohamed (1759-1851), who published his *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* in 1794 at Cork, Ireland, to which he had emigrated in 1784 following soldiering with the East India Company. Of these sources *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, which refers to observations of the Chinese emperor Kahn from Marco Polo's travels,

appears the most directly influential on Coleridge.ⁱⁱⁱ This is in terms of the vocabulary it invokes and in the visions of natural scenery it inspired the poet to emulate in his evocation of 'Kubla Kahn', and from the fact that Coleridge is on record of having read it and reflected upon it. Cultural critic Edward Said also analyses cultural representations of and between east and west in recent history. In the writings of the eighteenth century orientalist travelogues that affected Coleridge, Said claims that "[orientalism] retained, as an undislodged current of its discourse, a reconstructed religious impulse, a naturalized supernaturalism" (1995, p. 121). This supernaturalism also characterises the underlying torpidity of Coleridge's poem.

That Coleridge's imagination could be attuned to the fertile banks of Ganges as well as to Chinoiserie fashionable in eighteenth century British society is reflected in his letters. Coleridge wrote to a friend, John Thelwall on October 16, 1797, of the combination of orientalist imagism and opiate influence upon his writing: "I should much wish, like the Indian Vishnu, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of a Lotus, and wake once in a million years more" (1895, p. 229). While this suggests a Indian orientalist influence on Coleridge in 1797, the specifically Indian Hindu reference would tend to cast doubt on Leask's claim that it is a "literal fact that Kubla Kahn is a poem about the garden of a Chinese Emperor" (2001, p. 7). At least it shows that Coleridge's interests in Eastern philosophy and cultural aesthetics were not confined to Chinoiserie.

The motifs, figures and dreamscape described in Coleridge's poem 'Kubla Kahn' also bear a strikingly obvious resemblance with the former eighteenth-century farmhouse and riding school and stable rebuilt for the Prince of Wales in the Indian style from 1803-1808, near the river Stein. These were erected from designs by William Pordan at the Royal Pavilion at Brighton.^{iv} Nevertheless, as Leask suggests, Chinese aesthetics made a significant impact on European garden styles, architecture and decorative arts, and it is obvious that knowledge of these styles were imported to British gentlemen through such works as *Purchas His Pilgrims* and the natural descriptions contained therein (2001, p. 7). It is noteworthy that the definitive account of Chinese gardening was produced by Sir William Chambers in his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening*, published in 1772. This contained a dedication to George III, the Prince Regent's father.

There can be little doubt, however, that *Purchas his Pilgrims* was a major influence on Coleridge design for his poem 'Kubla Kahn' but the chief manifestation of Regency orientalism in British architecture, art and landscape was the Royal Pavilion at Brighton. Purchas's source was *The Most Notable and Famous Travels of Marcus Paulus*, translated into English by John Frampton in 1579.

'Cublay' was an oriental Prince – vigorous and cast with a gothic sense of terror, a descendant of Genghis Kahn. Cublai is 27 years old, valiant, strong, and of dignified bearing – an oriental monarch (incidentally the same age as the Prince of Wales at the time of Coleridge's claimed writing of 'Kubla Kahn' from the Preface to the 1816 version). *Pilgrimage* describes "a stately palace, encompassing sixteen miles of plaine ground with a wall" (1617, p. 350). However as Pearce points out, the character of Purchas's Kahn and Coleridge's mogul are different. (1981, p. 577). Purchas's Kahn is a King amid the hustle and bustle of civilisation, Coleridge's Kahn is a figure of reflective solitude. By comparison of the melee of Purchas's Kahn, Coleridge's monarchic figure is aloof, and the Xannadù that Coleridge's poem describes is a palace retreat, more in keeping with the ornate Chinese domes ordered to be built by the Prince Regent. Furthermore, Coleridge's Xannadù is 'twice six miles of fertile ground' – nearer in size to the original grounds and gardens of the farmhouse converted in stages into the Royal Pavilion by Holland and Nash (the Royal Pavilion was accompanied by an eight acre park).

However, there is more to the landscape of 'Kubla Kahn' than Coleridge's revisioning of Chinese and Indian cultivated paradise. For the poem's reverie and dreamlike vision of a precarious paradise summoned 'out of nowhere' with its gothic inter-relation of the natural and human-fashioned also owe something to Coleridge's childhood experiences in the countryside near Otter St. Mary. Pearce argues that it is a childhood experience in the wilds that precipitated the plangent, intimate urgency of Coleridge's self-revelatory tone, as recorded in his notebooks, "such a mixture of terror and pleasure, the stuff of dreams, is perfectly capable of transforming the milieu in which it occurs into 'a savage place, holy and enchanted,' in the words of the famous poem" (1981, p. 572). This tension of the sublime found an indirect route to the orientalism of 'Kubla Kahn'.

Coleridge's childhood landscape

The lake district near Keswick that Coleridge shared with Wordsworth precipitated the formal composition of the landscape in 'Kubla Kahn': "Before me – O god, what a scene. – the foreground a sloping wood, sloping down to the River and meadows, the serpent River beyond the River & the wood meadows terminated by Melbreak walled by the Melbreak" (1957, p. 537). Pearce suggests that the 'serpent River', 'shadows on the water', 'enclosed meadows', castle in the distance, 'savage places', are foreshadowed in Coleridge's notebooks (1981, p. 567).

Pearce also compares the 'Abyssinian maid' of 'Kubla Kahn' with the earlier Coleridge poem, 'Songs of the Pixies' (1793) whose madrigal figures were goddess of night, brilliant black, and possessed a

supernatural power that might conjure the building of pleasure domes amid fountains, during sleep on a 'violet bank' (1981, p. 568). The reverie and dreamlike quality of this poem, infused with the secret spirit of nature, is itself derived in part from the black muse of Milton's *Il Penseroso* (1645): "And therefore to our weaker view/ O'erlaid with black, staid Wisdom's hue." Perhaps the figure of the Abyssinian Maid is an oblique reference to Maria Fitzherbert, the Prince of Wales's long-time companion whom he (secretly, but invalidly) married in 1785 but of whom it is said an 'eye miniature' was buried with King George in 1830. Fitzherbert is perhaps to be considered having created a different sense of mystery due to the former Prince's father's disapproval of the Prince's relationship with her.

Certainly the romantic sublime, characterised by the suspension of disbelief at the awe and gravitas of natural scenery or human perception, influenced Coleridge both metaphysically and in depiction of landscape and people in 'Kubla Kahn', it foreshadows the 'Ancestral voices prophesying war!' that may obliquely refer to British relations with Napoleonic Europe. Pearce notes that the solitariness of Kahn is at first discordant (1981, p. 575). He stands at distance from the palace, watching the water in the shadow of the pleasure dome. The only other presences are the ancient, voices echoing the tumultuous waters, intimating 'prophecies of war.' Within this theatre Kahn stands as meditating perhaps summoned or accused. The Prince Regent's concerns with the affairs of state were contemporaneous with victory in the Napoleonic wars – over which he presided, perhaps like the victorious Kahn, hence 'Ancestral Voices prophesying War' may be the admonitions of the British government about the continued concern of conflict with Napoleonic France.

However, a further interpretation emphasises the metaphysical quality of Coleridge's poem – the equation of the philosopher poet with the emperor of the imagination, "[t]he loss that is lamented in Part II of 'Kubla Kahn' is the loss of the power to lift a work of art above mere "fancy" loss of the constructive and unifying power which Coleridge later termed 'secondary Imagination'" (Pearce, 1981, p. 58). The ethereal quality of Coleridge's poetic imagination is also affirmed by Reid, in as much as he states "the conventionality of human language, for Coleridge, reflects our inability to reason in a purely intuitive or immediate fashion . . ." (2001, para. 4). In this way the poem conjures as "reified tokens of human thought" and is not only about the power of the monarch in the poem 'Kubla Kahn' to assemble both natural and human-fashioned objects, events and experiences, 'A sunny Pleasure-Dome with Caves of Ice!', of majestic bearing but also about the power of the poet to invoke such fantastical images from the dreamwork of the opiate imagination (Reid, 2001, para. 5). It is a celebration of the poetic spirit, the confabulation of the poet's powers of recreation with those

of the Regency orientalist vogue of the day. 'Lines of an Autumnal Evening' also written in 1793 contain the elements which provide the formal symbolism of the poem (without the poet/creator figure which is perhaps more in keeping with the post 1800 Coleridge).

The origins of the 'pleasure dome' also have a possible European connection, other than orientalist Chinoiserie. Stillinger notes the parallel between Michelangelo's realisation of the dome of the pantheon of St. Peter's in Rome as a construction raised "in air" (1985, p. 38). He notes that the Romantic landscape painter, John Constable, commented upon seeing at St Paul's Cathedral London, the dome in the air of which "realizes Michelangelo's idea on seeing that of the Pantheon - 'I will build such a thing in the sky'." (1962-68, p. 231). The ornate orientalist forms of the converted at the stables in Brighton on their transmogrification into the Chinoiserie of the Royal Pavilion are obvious but overlooked examples of such constructions of domes 'in the air' (and an ice-ring) created at the Prince Regent's behest in Brighton, England.

Conclusion – the Royal Pavilion and 'Kubla Kahn'

The argument for the Prince Regent's Royal Pavilion holding a tangible claim as the source of Coleridge's symbolism in his poem 'Kubla Kahn' is plausible. There is no full published version of 'Kubla Kahn' before 1816 (the 'Crewe manuscript' version) and the claims for its existence in the fall of the year 1797 are taken at Coleridge's word from the Preface of 1816, other evidence being piecemeal and from letters without bearing direct mention of the poem (it is possible that lines of the poem existed in other forms before 1816 as the Preface mentions, 'This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable . . .'). Thus, in the Preface to the 'Crewe manuscript' publication, Coleridge claims the date of writing of the poem to be 1797. This date is consistent with his being influenced by the early Hindu and orientalist sources of imperial travel literature, notably the travels of Marco Polo and the description of Kahn's palace in *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, and by Coleridge's reading of the mythology and symbolism of the German romantic classics. It is also consistent with being influenced by the early architecture of the converted farmhouse of the Royal Pavilion, and the romantic preoccupations of Prince George, known to British high-society.

The experimentation with opium has a date by letter of 1803 and Coleridge directly relates the writing of the poem with consumption of the opiate. Were this to be the case then the opium would have had to have been consumed six years *after* the claimed date by Coleridge's Preface for the poem's original writing, or he may have used it twice. Hence, a later date of writing other than the date claimed in the 1816 Preface is possible for at least fragments of 'Kubla Kahn'. Two related

factors support this. Firstly, the increasing orientalism of the Royal Pavilion under the architectural guidance of the Prince of Wales after 1800, and the enduring theme of the Prince's unapproved liaison with Fitzherbert, then known to the British high-society, knowledge of which Coleridge was unlikely to be excluded from. Secondly, it is entirely in keeping *autobiographically* with the poems historical, dreamlike, revelatory, incantatory re-visioning, that Coleridge would claim an earlier date for the poem in the 1816 Preface than the actual date the poem is written, for it is consistent with the metafictional quality of the poem as a commentary on the 'act of creation' which bears this recursive historio-mythological pattern. Finally, it is also entirely possible that Coleridge's poem was read by and influenced Queen Victoria who first visited the Royal Pavilion in 1837, and whose reaction to the oriental pleasure dome was purportedly cool: 'The Pavilion is a strange, odd, Chinese looking place, both outside and inside. Most of the rooms are low, and I can see a morsel of the sea, from one of my sitting room windows' (p. 25). Thus the symbolism of Coleridge's poem held sway over later Victorian perceptions that were inspired by the Regency imagination of the poet's orientalist fugue.

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ⁱ However, the literary influences on 'Kubla Kahn' were more numerous still, and defined many of the great European literary minds of the eighteenth century and Coleridge's own time. They included: Staunton, Southey, Shelley, Marco Polo, Dante, Chambers, Bruce, 'Il Penseroso,' Purchas, Burder, Dante, Michelangelo, Keats, Boyd, Vishnu, Jones, Faust, Scheler, Fichte, Schelling, Mahamed, Gray, Young and Banks.

ⁱⁱ In particular, the Royal Pavilion at Brighton built for George Prince of Wales (from 1811 the Prince Regent, later King George IV, 1762-1830) in stages between 1787 and 1823, by architectural designs from Holland, Pordon and Nash. Coleridge's famous poem has a closer relationship with the Prince Regent than hitherto recognised.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fulford claims that "[t]he most likely route of influence [for Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn'] is via Southey" however the 'Xanadu' of Southey's *Thalaba* (1801) is derived from *Purchas's Pilgrimage* (1614). But the point is moot as no single source is directly identifiable (2006, 117).

^{iv} The stables were later converted in 1860 into a concert hall known as the Brighton Dome after the Royal Pavilion passed into civic hands purchased by the town of Brighton in 1850 for 53 000 pounds.