

‘Restore me to Reality’ Revisiting Coleridge’s Figure of ‘My pensive Sara’

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A relation (always social) determines the terms and not the reverse.
Michel De Certeau ¹

‘My Pensive Sara’ is the name Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb habitually used to refer to the poem that we now call ‘The Eolian Harp.’ STC often quoted portions of this lyric in his letters and told friends in 1796 it was ‘my favorite of *my* poems.’² Today, speaking for the majority of critics, Paul Magnuson has aptly labeled ‘The Eolian Harp’ ‘one of Coleridge’s most important and romanticism’s most seminal poems.’³ Scholars cite various reasons for ‘The Eolian Harp’s’ pride of place: among them are its inaugural expression of the ‘grand Romantic idea of the ‘One life’ ’;⁴ its depictions of the Romantic imagination at work;⁵ and its innovative and distinctive conversational structure.⁶ While these and other commentaries on the poem have made important contributions to critical understanding of this text, none, to my mind, has looked carefully or kindly enough at Coleridge’s original representation of the character who signals the crisis at the heart of the narrative, the speaker’s beloved, if pensive, Sara.

To revisit and perhaps resuscitate the figure of ‘Sara,’ I shall focus upon certain events, relationships, and texts in Coleridge’s life that date from 1790 to 1796, the years leading up to and including the composition and publication of the earliest version of ‘The Eolian Harp’ in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796). It is a version that did not yet boast the heralded ‘one life’ passage, thus making it a substantially different poem than the one we call ‘The Eolian Harp.’⁷ Indeed, Coleridge gave this text a radically different title: ‘Effusion XXXV. Composed August 20th, 1795, at Clevedon, Somersetshire.’⁸ My research

¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), xi.

² Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, (Clarendon Press, 1954), pp. 294-295. Hereafter cited as *CL*.

³ Paul Magnuson, ‘“The Eolian Harp” in Context,’ in *Studies in Romanticism*, 24 (Spring 1985): 3-20, 3.

⁴ Albert Gérard, ‘Counterfeiting Infinity: “The Eolian Harp” and the Growth of Coleridge’s Mind,’ in *Journal of English and German Philology*, 60 (1961): 411-422, 411.

⁵ Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome* (Oxford University Press, 1941), 99.

⁶ Ronald Wendling, ‘Coleridge and the Consistency of “The Eolian Harp,”’ in *Studies in Romanticism*, 8 (Autumn 1968): 26-42, 26.

⁷ Prior to the publication of J. C. C. May’s four-volume edition of Coleridge’s poems, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works* (Princeton University Press, copyright 2001, but only available within the last twelve-month), Paul Cheshire’s article on ‘The Eolian Harp,’ in *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 17 (Summer 2001): 1-22 was the most complete scholarly discussion of the successive versions of ‘The Eolian Harp.’ Cheshire’s essay includes an innovative and very useful fold-out that tracks the changes in each version, and aptly argues that ‘the whole sequence [is] a single kinetic metapoem, whose very changes are a form of poetry’ (2).

⁸ J. C. C. Mays’ edition of Coleridge’s poems was not yet available at the time I began this paper, so I used a first edition of *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796) in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin for all quotations from ‘The Eolian Harp.’ The poem appears on pages 96-100 of that edition and is titled:

suggests that the figure of 'pensive Sara' as conceived in 1795-6 is more complicated than we have heretofore recognized and that 'Sara' operates as an essential agent in protecting and sustaining the speaker's source of poetic power. Moreover, I believe that in Coleridge's construction of the figure of 'Sara' and his fashioning of the conclusion of 'Effusion XXXV,' the poet offers a positive representation of womankind and an alternative narrative of The Fall, both of which challenge those in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

To understand the figure of 'Sara,' we must first consider the nature of the poem's narrator, whom scholars view as one of the period's earliest representations of the Romantic Poet. This poet is a creature who luxuriates in the 'soothing sweet[ness]' (2) of sitting in his cottage garden with a pretty woman. He makes much of nature, turning jasmine and myrtle into 'Meet emblems... of innocence and love' (5). He is well read and capable of drawing upon various archetypal stories, fairy tales, and theories of both metaphysicians and contemporary physicians for his ideas and imagery. His brain is 'indolent and passive' (33), like the Eolian harp, and many 'idle flitting phantasies' (32) blow through him, as the wind blows through the harp strings. Thus the reader is invited not only to hear Eolian harp music and to see the figural productions of the speaker's mind, such as 'twilight Elfins' (21) and 'birds of Paradise' (24), but also to imagine the ways in which the Romantic Poet is like a sensitive, finely tuned instrument, poised to make poetry out of whatever comes his way. This creative individual is not, however, a solitary being; he is a man who loves and is profoundly influenced by the presence and beliefs of a woman he calls 'heart-honor'd' (56). Finally, Coleridge's poet in 'My Pensive Sara' reverently acknowledges a merciful, if 'INCOMPREHENSIBLE' (51), God and aspires to a 'Faith that inly *feels*' (52).⁹

Typically, scholars' evaluations of the representation of the Romantic Poet and his project in 'Effusion XXXV' are sympathetic, and their interpretations of the poem's conclusion often hinge upon their understanding of his relationship with the poem's other character, 'pensive Sara.' The conventional assumption is that 'Sara' refers to Coleridge's wife, Sarah Fricker. The specificity of the date in the poem's title (just two months prior to their marriage); the setting in Clevedon (the newlyweds' first home); and STC's tendency to use autobiographical material elsewhere in his poetry support this inference. Indeed, Magnuson has commented that it would be difficult to see 'Effusion XXXV' as anything other than 'a set of private associations.'¹⁰ Because Mrs. Coleridge has been saddled with a reputation for being

'Effusion XXV. Composed August 20th, 1795, At Clevedon, Somersetshire.' To make it clear that I am referring to the earliest published version of the poem, I will cite it throughout this paper as either 'Effusion XXXV' or 'My Pensive Sara.' Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to lines in this text.

⁹ It is significant that the only words in the poem that are printed in all capital letters are 'INCOMPREHENSIBLE,' 'SARA' (in the first line of the poem), as well as 'PEACE,' 'COT,' and 'THEE' (all of which appear in the last line of the poem). These orthographic decisions suggest the honor the poet accorded the figure of 'Sara.'

¹⁰ Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 145.

insensitive to her husband's work and suspicious of the Wordsworths' influence upon him, the correlation of Sarah Fricker with 'pensive Sara' makes it easy to discount or discredit the figural representation of the speaker's companion and her behavior while valorizing the poem's depiction of the poet.¹¹

For example, scholars such as Magnuson, who applaud the narrator's supple and vigorous imagination, usually see the transition effected in line 41 by Sara's reproof as one of negation, denial, or perhaps of reduction (1985, 19). This boring, sad woman interferes with the delightfully pleasurable and almost sacred exercise of a poet's mind.¹² Similarly, Jean Pierre Mileur contends that Sara's interference signals nothing less than the failure of poetic imagination.¹³ Another common evaluation of the poem's final lines is that they pessimistically concede the fragility of the creative faculty (however brilliant it may be) by demonstrating how vulnerable poets are, not only to critics, but also to domestic cares, their own weaknesses, and to certain conservative views, including religious ones. This conclusion, too, almost always points a damning finger at 'Sara.'¹⁴

Very different conclusions can be drawn from the poem if the figure of 'Sara' is connected with more historically precise reports about Miss Fricker and Coleridge in the month he wrote the poem and if more specifically detailed data about STC's other social relationships, personal experiences, values, and

¹¹ See Richard Holmes, *Coleridge, Early Visions* (Viking Press, 1989), 107, regarding Sara Fricker Coleridge's lack of involvement in her husband's literary endeavors. SFC's unhappiness with her husband did not become fully aroused, however, until *after* his trip to Germany with William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1798-99), more than four years after the publication of 'Effusion XXXV.' For more on the rivalry between Sarah Fricker Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth see Molly Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love, a Life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Norton, 1986-7) and Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets* (St. Martin's Press, 2000).

¹² Unlike later printings of the text, in the 1796 edition of this poem, line 41 does not begin a new stanza. This line and the three succeeding it (ending with 'And biddest me walk humbly with my God') are part of the second stanza, which begins at line 26 with 'And thus, my Love! As on the midway slop...'. This is the stanza that records the speaker's 'Romantic' speculation about the nature of the universe (swept by a 'Plastic and vast... intellectual Breeze... the Soul of each, and God of all'). The rhetoric of the arrangement of these lines, however, suggests that Sara's 'mild reproof' and request for the speaker to 'walk humbly with [his] God' eclipse these 'idle flitting phantasies.'

¹³ In *Vision and Revision*, Mileur argues that Sara's reproof causes her lover to dismiss his poetic 'shapings' as 'unhallow'd' products of an 'unregenerate mind.' This leads him (and Coleridge) to shut down the poem in an abrupt and anticlimactic fashion. Mileur, therefore, calls the conclusion of the poem a 'contraction' and a failure of poetic imagination. Other similarly negative readings of the ending of the poem include that of Jeanie Watson, author of *Risking Enchantment, Coleridge's Symbolic World of Faery* (University of Nebraska Press, 1990), who labels the poem's concluding lines 'disappointing and false' (76); and that of M. H. Abrams, who calls the concluding lines as 'inconsequent as well as anticlimactic' in his essay 'Coleridge's 'A Light in Sound,' in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Modern Critical Views*, Harold Bloom, ed. (Chelsea House, 1986): 67-88, 88. Ronald Wendling, on the other hand, concedes that the poem's conclusion—and Sara's part in it—contain 'nothing explicitly contradictory to the two passages of romantic speculation which precede it' (27).

¹⁴ Such readings often cite several letters Coleridge wrote in 1794 that express the poet's feelings for another woman, his reluctance to marry Sarah Fricker, and his fear that marriage might be disastrous for his creative and professional life. See, for example, Coleridge's letter to Southey dated 3 November 1794, in which he speaks of his abiding love of Mary Evans (CL I 121-124), as well as the letter dated 9 December 1794, in which he declares that he mistook the 'ebullience of *schematism*' for love of Sarah Fricker (CL I 132). In a letter to Southey dated 29 December 1794, Coleridge promises that he 'will [nevertheless] do [his] duty' and marry Sarah Fricker, even though he still loves Mary Evans (CL I 145-146). Another letter about Coleridge's enduring feelings for Evans was also written to Francis Wrangham on 24 October 1794 (CL I 120-121).

beliefs during the time leading up to his composition of 'Effusion XXXV' are taken into consideration.

A brief rehearsal of Coleridge's well-documented history between 1792 and 1795 includes the following: his becoming 'a proverb to [his] University for Idleness' and debauchery (*CL* I 67); his attempt to escape the misery and shame of debts, poor academic performance, and romantic disappointment by running away to enlist in the army; and then, a few months later, his joining Southey and the Fricker sisters in the utopian scheme of Pantisocracy. Throughout this period of emotional chaos, however, Coleridge appears to have maintained an enduring belief, as he explains in 'Religious Musings' (the final poem in the volume in which 'Effusion XXXV' first appeared),¹⁵ that God was the origin of the 'moral world's cohesion.'¹⁶ Elsewhere in 'Religious Musings' Coleridge's speaker claims that being out of touch with his maker allows the accession of 'An Anarchy of Spirits' (146) in which one becomes 'Toy-bewitched,/Made blind by lusts, disherited of soul,' (146-7). Such a person is 'A sordid solitary thing' (149). The ideas manifest in these lines suggest that Sara's behavior and her conversation with the narrator at the end of 'Effusion XXXV' should be taken more seriously. To be specific, despite the narrator's charming, imaginative nature, he is ranging dangerously far a-field from his own life-sustaining religious beliefs, becoming bewitched by the toys of his imagination and linguistic facility and blind to the possibility that he might lose his soul along the way. Hence, Sara's interruption of his ramblings operates as a deadly serious effort to rescue him as a man and a poet.

Various pieces of historical evidence support this conclusion; for, among other things, they show that despite Coleridge's premarital anxieties noted by many critics, during the days in which he was working on 'Effusion XXXV,' he and Sarah were happy in their domestic life.¹⁷ STC wrote Southey to this effect in early August 1795 saying that 'Domestic happiness is the greatest of things sublunary' (*CL* I 158). Shortly after his wedding on 4 October 1795, Coleridge wrote Thomas Poole describing the 'solemn Joy' of being 'united to the woman, whom I love best of all created Beings' (*CL* I 160). He happily describes how he and Sarah are 'quite domesticated at Clevedon' where 'the prospect around [them] is perhaps more *various* than any in the kingdom,' so that his 'Eye gluttonizes,' and he believes that he 'shall assuredly write Rhymes' (*CL* I 160). In the spring of that same year, while lecturing in Bristol, Coleridge explained in a more general way how important he felt domestic relationships were. The searcher after Truth, he told his audience,

¹⁵ The placement of 'Religious Musings' as the final poem in *Poems on Various Subjects* emphasizes how seriously Coleridge took the beliefs it expresses about the spiritual life, just as Wordsworth's placement of 'Tintern Abbey' as the final poem in *Lyrical Ballads* announces and underscores his beliefs about nature.

¹⁶ J. C. C. Mays, ed. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Poetical Works*, (Princeton University Press, 2001): I 115 145. Hereafter cited as 16—PW. All subsequent quotations from this poem refer to this text and parenthetical citations refer to line numbers.

¹⁷ See Holmes 91 and 95.

must love and be beloved; for general Benevolence is a necessary motive to constancy of pursuit; and this general Benevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections... (LPR 46)

As Robert Barth has noted, later in life Coleridge expressed similarly positive sentiments about social and domestic relationships, especially married friendship, declaring that

Friendship satisfies the highest parts of our nature; but a wife, who is capable of friendship, satisfies all. The great business of real unostentatious Virtue is—not to eradicate any genuine instinct or appetite of human nature; but—to establish a concern & unity betwixt all parts of our nature, to give a Feeling and a Passion to our purer Intellect, and to intellectualize our feelings & passions.¹⁸

Because Coleridge's thoughts could run along lines such as these and because it is more accurate to associate the 'pensive Sara' of 1795-6 with the younger, happier Mrs. Coleridge, it is possible to trace the following alternative scenario in 'Effusion XXXV': the speaker's imaginative play in the early part of the text gives a Feeling and a Passion to his Intellect, and the concern and caution he subsequently sees in Sara's eye invites him to intellectualize these feelings and passions, so they will be in harmony with his moral system. Hence, rather than being an unsympathetic or dogmatic effort to eradicate the narrator's genuine instinct or appetite for poetry and philosophy, Sara's business is to help him unify the different parts of his nature. In doing so with self-effacing meekness, she proves herself to be unostentatiously virtuous. This view of the relationship between the poet and Sara is also supported by Coleridge's assertions in 1794 that the 'leading idea' for the members of their Pantisocratic community was 'to make men *necessarily* virtuous by removing all Motives to Evil—all possible temptations' (CL I 114) and that all members of the community should be responsible for the moral behavior of their fellows.¹⁹

Other data drawn from Coleridge's contemporaneous correspondence suggests that he truly appreciated the regenerative power of relationships such as the one he depicts in 'Effusion XXXV.' Letters describing his prior

¹⁸ Quoted in Robert Barth *Coleridge and the Power of Love* (University of Missouri Press, 1988), 15-16, n. 82.

¹⁹ By the time STC was writing 'My Pensive Sara,' Southey had abandoned the Pantisocracy scheme. Angry and frustrated, Coleridge felt he and Sara were the last remnants of the Pantisocratic union. Other evidence that Coleridge was working out of the Pantisocratic model in 'Effusion XXXV' comes from the language of 'Sonnet on Pantisocracy,' a copy of which STC sent to Robert Southey in 1794. This sonnet explains that in their new world home the Pantisocrats will

seek the cottag'd dell
Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray,
And dancing to the moonlight Roundelay,
The wizard Passions weave an holy spell. (CW I 131 5-8)

experiences with Mary Evans, a young woman whom he loved and respected, refer approvingly to the way they encouraged and monitored each other intellectually, creatively, and spiritually. We see something of what this relationship must have been like in a letter Evans wrote Coleridge when she received news about his involvement in the Pantisocracy scheme. Writing to Robert Southey on 21 October 1794, STC quoted this letter at length; and we hear echoes of his quotations in 'Effusion XXXV.' For example, Evans' letter declares that despite rumors to the contrary, she knows Coleridge is still a Christian. Evans' letter manifests appreciation of, but also concern about, aspects of Coleridge's character that sound very much like those of the narrator in 'Effusion XXXV.' 'There is an Eagerness,' Evans writes, 'in your Nature, which is ever hurrying you into [rash Schemes and] the sad Extreme.' She fears that his 'noble Mind is here *o'erthrown*. Blasted with Exstasy' (CL I 112).²⁰

The language and sense of Coleridge's answer to Evans' letter also echo in 'Effusion XXXV.' STC praises Evans' 'stores of strong understanding,' implores her to 'Restore me to *Reality*,' and applauds her gentle 'firmness' (CL I 130, 144). In the poem, Coleridge's speaker expresses a similar gratitude for Sara's 'mild reproof' (41) and promptly accepts her viewpoint: 'Well has thou said and holily dispraised/ These shapings of the unregenerate mind' (47). Such correlations to Coleridge's experiences with Mary Evans broaden the scope and elevate the figure of 'pensive Sara.'

Indeed, by slipping the hold that anachronistic references to the older, embittered Mrs. Coleridge have exerted on critics' understandings of 'pensive Sara;' by recalling the happiness STC shared, however briefly, with Miss Fricker in 1795; and by including his relationship with Mary Evans as part of the real-life contextual soup out of which Coleridge created 'pensive Sara,' we lend additional weight to the notion that 'Effusion XXXV' does not disparage its female figure. It honors her. Indeed, it appears that Sara's thematic function in the poem is to help her beloved stay on the track of his spiritual regeneration, which not co-incidentally protects his poetic power.

Additional support for critical reclamation of the figure of 'pensive Sara' surfaces if we consider the somewhat surprising possibility that 'Effusion XXXV' mimics, but also revises certain aspects of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.²¹ We know that Coleridge was a poetic experimentalist, that he was a student of Milton, and that he later urged Wordsworth to create in *The Recluse* a modern

²⁰ As far as I know, Mary Evan's letter is not extant; our knowledge of it comes from Coleridge's letters. Hence, it is possible, as Graham Davidson suggested in an email to me 20 October 2004, that this letter is Coleridge's own construction of yet another young woman's sentiments towards himself; and, indeed, the language of the quotation is 'remarkably Coleridgean.' If this is the case, the letter's construction is, nevertheless, in the same register as Coleridge's construction of 'pensive Sara;' and, as such, it supports my argument that STC approved of the sentiments attributed to these women.

²¹ In Paul Cheshire's essay on 'The Eolian Harp,' *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 17, Summer 2001, page 4 and 6, Cheshire also notes the striking number of 'Miltonism[s]' or allusions to Milton in both 'The Eolian Harp' and 'Religious Musings.'

epic on the scale of *Paradise Lost*. Hence, it is not unreasonable to consider the possibility that Coleridge himself might attempt a revision of parts of that great poem. While the length and scope of 'Effusion XXXV' and *Paradise Lost* are quite different, several parallels between the narratives in the two poems are striking. Both stories are enacted in similarly sensuous, natural settings--gardens overgrown with flowers and myrtle (3-4 in STC's poem; Book 9, l. 432 in Milton's).²² The air in both gardens is fragrant: the 'exquisite... scents' (9) of Coleridge's garden bring to mind the 'cloud of fragrance' that veils Eve in *Paradise Lost* (425). Satan's temptation speech to Eve is characterized as a 'storm so nigh' (433). 'Effusion XXXV' describes 'gales from Faery Land' (22).

The characters of 'Effusion XXXV' evoke *Paradise Lost* as well. Like Milton's Adam and Eve, Coleridge's lovers seem to be the only two people on earth. Like Eve, Sara is soft and feminine; and like Adam, Coleridge's narrator is intellectually gifted. We learn in the course of the poem, however, that unlike Adam, STC's narrator has already sinned. This detail signals the beginning of Coleridge's revision of Milton. STC's Adam is a willful character, while his Eve is thoughtful and God-fearing. Coleridge emphasizes the Miltonic concern with pride, as well; but it is the male Poet who must be urged to 'walk [more] humbly with [his] God,' not his female partner.

In his revision of the Fall narrative, Coleridge's speaker becomes so self-absorbed that, like Milton's Eve, he forgets his partner and the beliefs they share about God, including their God's explicit dictum against pride. Ecstatically riding the winds of his imagination, the narrator asks:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweep
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (36-40)

Sara's recognition of her lover's intellectual pride and her fear that his words constitute an unholy affront to their God trigger the crisis of the poem's narrative. In point of fact, as he becomes increasingly carried away by his intellectual power and self-importance, Coleridge's speaker resembles not only Milton's Eve, but also his fallen archangel Satan. Indeed, the playfulness of this passage and its imagery of the breeze evoke the moment in *Paradise Lost* when Satan, disguised as the sensuously beautiful serpent, begins his temptation of Eve:

His gentle dumb expression, turned, at length,

²² All citations from *Paradise Lost* come from Hughes' edition: Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose* (Macmillan, 1957). Unless otherwise noted, subsequent parenthetical citations from *Paradise Lost* refer to Book 9; numbers cited are line numbers.

The eye of Eve to mark his play: he, glad
 Of her attention gained, with serpent tongue
 Organic, or impulse of vocal air,
 His fraudulent temptation thus began. (527-531)

The verbal and conceptual similarities between these two passages are striking: (1) like Satan, Coleridge's speaker delights in enthralling a lovely young woman with verbal images and ideas that are, according to the values ultimately expressed in the poem, fraudulent; (2) both Satan and Coleridge's narrator seem gentle, playful, and harmless at the very moment that their vocalizations are most dangerous; and (3) Coleridge's narrator and Milton's Satan are proud, self-indulgent, and misdirected in their use of their considerable powers of reason and imagination.²³

To complete the comparison, let us recall that when Milton's Adam and Eve are banished from Eden, the angel Michael informs them that they must learn to subject their will to God and that they must add

Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith,
 Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,
 By name to come called charity, the soul
 Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loath
 To leave this Paradise, but shall possess
 A paradise within thee, happier far. (Bk. 12, 581-587)

In Coleridge's poem, Sara follows Michael, urging her beloved to verbal deeds that are not only more temperate but also answerable to his rekindled knowledge that the one thing needful for him as a man and as a poet is a properly humble relationship with God. Moreover, Sara's look calls him back to the happiness of 'Faith that inly feels' (52), that is, to a kind of paradise within.

Milton's narrative of the fall rotates on the axis of Satan's alienation from God. Because of his pride and desire to be God's equal, the archangel is ejected from heaven. Milton's human characters give in to Satan's vengeful seduction, and so God exiles them from the garden, but promises that in the world east of Eden they may choose to live reverent and happy lives. Because of the inequality in the mental and moral capacities that Milton has assigned these characters, however, Adam appears to be more blessed than Eve; and his future looks more promising. Indeed, Milton's poem perpetuates the unfortunate view of women as vain, stupid, weak, selfish, and destructive and offers little hope for their having any kind of rich or fulfilling lives without the guidance or permission of men.

²³ The passage just quoted calls to mind another interesting parallel between the two poems. Milton tells us the Fall begins with Eve's eye being turned by Satan; in 'Effusion XXXV' Coleridge uses the 'mild reproof' in Sara's 'more serious eye' to prevent him from falling.

In contrast, the axis of Coleridge's lapsarian narrative is unity with God. When the narrator begins to wobble on this axis, seduced by the exercise of his seemingly god-like ability to create beautiful words and images, Coleridge uses a woman's virtue and her gentle expression of concern to recall her lover to humility, temperance, faith, and—perhaps most significantly for the Poet—to creative action. Coleridge's characters already live in a fallen world, but it is one in which the woman teaches, and her lover recovers, meek sensibility. It is also a world in which the precepts and practices of Pantisocracy promise to protect them both from further temptation. Surprising in the context of some of Coleridge's later uncomplimentary utterances about women, his 'pensive Sara' seems to be (at the very least) Adam's equal; consequently, she is equally deserving of and likely to achieve a full and godly life.

Understood in this way, the figure of 'pensive Sara' in Coleridge's 'Effusion XXXV' is heroic, both dramatically and morally. Though represented on the surface as humble and self-effacing, this female figure proves to be a brave and virtuous creature, one who is not only soft, loving, and sympathetic, but also strong, thoughtful, and responsible. Significantly, 'pensive Sara' is assigned the high privilege of helping to reframe and preserve the imaginative genius of a 'wilder'd' and nearly lost Romantic Poet. By restoring her beloved to reality and by helping him recall and praise the healing mercies of his God, Sara also helps him retain his home in their lovely English garden, something Milton's Adam was unable to accomplish for Eve.

I conclude that contemporary readers should not discount Coleridge's figure of 'pensive Sara' in 'Effusion XXXV' and automatically privilege the poem's representation of the Poet; to do so risks misrepresenting many of the core beliefs and real-life experiences that shaped Coleridge's early literary career. In a poem that Coleridge told Southey was 'the most perfect Poem, I ever wrote,'²⁴ it can be no accident that the final image—after 'PEACE' and after home—is not that of a brilliantly imaginative poet; it is an image of a humble, but 'heart-honored' and reverent maid, Sara.

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²⁴ 16—PW 232.