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“In Cælibe Toro meo”: Coleridge’s “old sofa, half bed” at Greta Hall

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AFTER NOTING the stunning panoramic lakeland views through the two windows of Coleridge’s Greta Hall study, Charles Lamb memorably conveyed the eccentric character of this “large antique ill-shaped room” by listing a selection of its contents: an organ “big enough for a church”, an aeolian harp, and an “old sofa, half bed”.¹ My brief note here concerns Coleridge’s Latin expression for this last piece of furniture, which features in his notebook entry (CN I 1718) of December 1803.

When in a state of pleasurable & balmy Quietness I feel my Cheek and Temple on the nicely made up Pillow in Cælibe Toro meo, the fire-gleam on my dear Books, that fill up one whole side from ceiling to floor of my Tall Study—& winds, perhaps are driving the rain, or whistling in frost, at my blessed Window, whence I see Borrodale, the Lake, Newlands—wood, water, mountains, omniform Beauty—O then as I first sink on the pillow, as if Sleep had indeed a material *realm*, as if when I sank on my pillow, I was entering that region & realized Faery Land of Sleep—O then what visions have I had, what dreams—the Bark, the Sea, ~~the~~ all the shapes & sounds & adventures made up of the Stuff of Sleep & Dreams, & yet my Reason at the Rudder/O what visions, <μαστοι> as if my Cheek & Temple were lying on me gale o’ mast on—Seele meines Lebens!—& I sink down the waters, thro’ Seas & Seas—yet warm, yet a Spirit—/Pillow = mast high <οι>.

Kathleen Coburn’s translation of “Cælibe Toro meo” as “on my celibate couch” can steer the reader in the wrong direction. *Caelebs* means unmarried, widowed or divorced. *Torus* is a word of many applications, which applied to a bed, refers to a place of sexual union. (*Torus* 5, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed P.G.W.Glare). The expression *caelebs torus* (nominative of *caelibe toro*), can be found in Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, where it carries a clear connotation of extra-marital sexual activity. In Seneca’s play Clytemnestra jealously complains that her husband Agamemnon, away at Troy, always has a barbarian mistress in his *caelebs torus* (Line 185). Coleridge’s study bed, as this notebook entry makes abundantly clear, offers him just such opportunities in his fantasy world. A recent editor of Seneca’s play notes *caelebs torus* and offers two other usages, but neither of these combine *torus* and *caelebs*.² This link to Seneca is strengthened by the knowledge that Coleridge was reading his tragedies at Greta Hall during this period. In January 1801 he was reading *Thyestes* (CN I 884), and in September 1803 *Troades* (CN I 1507).

¹ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed Edwin W. Marris Jr (Cornell UP, 1976), II 68-69.

² Seneca, *Agamemnon*, ed with a commentary by R.J.Tarrant (Cambridge: 1976), commentary on line 185.

I have amended the layout of Coburn's published transcription of the bottom line of this notebook entry. Coburn's text placed "Pillow = mast high" a line below its true position as if Coleridge intended it as a footnote. "Pillow..." should be a direct continuation of "Spirit—/". Coburn did this to ensure that <ot> appeared directly above "high" as written by Coleridge on the page, but this is contrary to her usual editorial practice.

To make this a comprehensive note on Coleridge's passage, for those who don't have Coburn's volume to hand, I will add her glosses here:

me gale o' mast on: large breasted (phonetic from the Greek megalomaston)

Seele meines Lebens: soul of my life (German).

μαστοι; mast high <ot>: mastoi = breasts (Greek).

As well as serving as an anglicised pun on the Greek for breasts, regardless of whether having a mega "mast on" was a bawdy colloquial expression in Coleridge's day, the "mast high" at the end surely indicates the raising of his genital mainsail.

Coleridge seems to be describing a habitual experience of sinking into an erotically charged opium reverie. This entire passage provides a very useful background to his poem 'The Daydream' where he is lying on a couch dreaming of being kissed by Sara Hutchinson, and is then interrupted from his erotic reverie by little Hartley creeping onto his bed like a boy from Porlock (PW II 1 702-3). Mays' headnote suggests that this poem is based on a memory of a real kissing incident at Gallow Hill. It seems likely that such memories were treasured, and regularly re-enacted as Asra fantasies, in Coleridge's *Caelibe Toro* at Greta Hall.