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The Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce
(Palgrave, 2005)
by Anya Taylor

THIS is a challenging, ambitious and rewarding book. Anya Taylor aims to shed new light across the full extent of Coleridge's development by focusing on his erotic life, which, she argues, has been generally neglected. Taylor presents a Coleridge invigorated by 'love as a source of energy', not merely in his 'excitement about the body' (1), but in his whole imaginative and intellectual being. Her study is wide-ranging and draws on a variety of disciplines, encompassing biography, literary criticism, and social, cultural and legal history.

The first chapter introduces the case for Coleridge as a passionate 'master love-poet' (2), whose experience of love impels his psychological, philosophical and religious thinking. Each of the subsequent nine chapters presents a discrete perspective: the sensual energy of Coleridge's early poetic responses to women; the disaster of his marriage; his awareness of women's social and economic vulnerabilities, which sets the context for discussion of *Christabel*; his love for Sara Hutchinson, in many ways the core of the book's interest; and the paralysing constraints of the divorce laws, which afforded Coleridge no possible release from the trap of his marriage. Taylor then goes on to examine Coleridge's responses to the ending of his relationship with Sara Hutchinson; concluding with the elderly Coleridge's experience-forged philosophies of identity and love: the wisdom and resilience of passion's survivor. The thread running through the book is Coleridge's development from sensual, affectionate observation of women; through hearing, listening, and passionate attunement to their voices; to a reverently anxious care for the personhood of women in a society repressive of female free-agency.

Taylor characterizes herself, in disarming terms, as a devoted follower of Coleridge: 'His lingering charm to doddering female scholars like myself is mysterious, and lies in his attentiveness to women's bodies and expressions, his physical vitality, his hilarity, his recognition of the difficulties inherent in women's lives, his own difficulties in love and willingness to express them openly, and his humility toward being a person' (5). A book written with such principled personal engagement promises insight and originality; it does not disappoint.

Taylor's discussion of the early Coleridge in her temptingly-entitled chapter, 'First Love and Flirting Verses', entertainingly attends to qualities such as the young poet's audacious boldness, 'rollicking humour' and finely-attuned sensitivity. Taylor refers to a range of poems written between 1789 and 1794 to show that Coleridge was 'more precociously amorous than we have imagined' (11); for example, in provocative verses addressed to a local Devon beauty:

A thousand loves her gentle face adorn,
 Fair as the blushes of a summer morn:
 A thousand loves around her forehead fly,
 A thousand loves sit melting in her eye:
 Love lights her smile—in joy's red nectar dips
 The opening rose, and plants it on her lips. (PW, 60, 41-46)

In discussing love poems of this period, and Coleridge's early observations of women in his letters, Taylor draws attention to a richly sensual awareness of physical detail; at the same time showing his ready sympathy and openness in entering imaginatively into female experience. In letters to Mary Evans, the young woman with whom he formed his first close attachment, Coleridge is brashly suggestive, as when he refers to her 'beautiful little leg' (12); but the relationship as a whole is on the level of 'intellectual and ethical agreement' (18). Taylor places particular emphasis on the couple's reading and talking, their development of shared values, of which Coleridge wrote: 'We formed each other's minds—our ideas were blended' (18).

The activities of reading and discussion were of central significance, to be repeated in Coleridge's later relationships with women: especially with Sara Hutchinson and, later, Anne Gillman. In terms of Coleridge's erotic experience, his passion for Sara Hutchinson is the most significant element of the book. Taylor adduces *Love* as a key text in this respect, a poem in which Coleridge announces to the world that he has 'fallen in love' (78). She draws parallels between Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto Five; the lovers in Coleridge's poem; and the poet and Sarah Hutchinson. As Dante's lovers come to love via reading, Coleridge's do so via storytelling, while Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson learned to love each other 'as they read together' (82); a physically arousing activity, engaging 'eyes, touch, movement, hands, mouths and the warmth of proximity' (85). Taylor discusses other 'Asra' poems of the period 1799-1802: her comments on *After Bathing in the Sea at Scarborough*, for example, and *The Keepsake*, 'a poem that reveals more ardour than Coleridge is usually given credit for' (86), suggest the release in Coleridge of excited joyful energy and an intensely sensual passion.

Anya Taylor argues that Coleridge's love for Sara Hutchinson was reciprocal; and that we should not assume an adherence to chastity in their relationship. She cites the following notebook sentence: 'the fuller my inner being is of the sense, the more my outward organs yearn and crave for it', commenting that this would take 'a good bit of contortion to appear chaste' (90). Taylor's view of the sexual nature of the relationship is often compelling; however, this interpretative distinction between intense longing or fantasy, and actual physical experience, is questionable. Furthermore, as George Whalley acknowledged,¹ and John Worthen has more recently shown, there are

¹ George Whalley, *Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson and the Asra Poems* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955). Whalley writes: "To draw inferences from the "life" to the poems is as [...] hazardous [...] as [...] to draw inferences from the poems to the "life" (p.97).

difficulties in using poems and notebook entries, as Taylor does, to ‘describe events in a biography’.² The evidence would seem equally to fit a reading that ‘the relationship existed in Coleridge’s head far more vividly than anywhere else’;³ or that Sara Hutchinson is for Coleridge ‘an ideal being, an angel or an enchantress’, as much as ‘an ordinary, if witty woman from the North of England’;⁴ or the view that Coleridge’s love is ‘a style of self-oblivion’, an ideal in the quest for ‘reduction of division to oneness’.⁵ Taylor’s concern, however, is with the ways in which Coleridge’s physical and affective experience shapes his poetry and thought. The narrative of love she constructs, therefore, invites us to enter, imaginatively, the subtle nuances of intimacy in a vibrant, evolving relationship. For example, Taylor cites Coleridge’s gift to Sara of Thomas Browne’s *Works*, which he annotated for her on leaving for Malta, envisaging a continuation of loving communion through reading and sharing ideas. Of Coleridge’s marking of a significant passage, Taylor comments: ‘The line in the margin recreates from a distance the passionate glance that would have passed between them in reading aloud together these words about united souls’ (96). This is a vivid and memorable insight. Ultimately, whether the relationship was reciprocal, whether chaste or sexual, is unknowable; just as we cannot be sure why it ended abruptly in March 1810.⁶ The letters between Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson, which might have shed light on these questions, were destroyed, so that our answers must, necessarily, remain speculative. It is undeniable, though, that the intensity of Coleridge’s love for Sara Hutchinson, whether physical or ideal, his desperation and grief at the incompleteness of their relationship, his desolation at her eventual absence from his life—inextricably bound up with what he saw as Wordsworth’s betrayal—exerted a decisive and devastating influence on the remainder of his life and work.

Coleridge’s entrapment within a failed marriage, almost the death of his soul (23), was the insuperable barrier to fulfilment with Sara Hutchinson. Why Coleridge married the ‘outspoken and opinionated’ Sara Fricker ‘will’, says Taylor, ‘always remain a mystery’ (19). The answer, perhaps, has its origins in Coleridge’s childhood experiences of loss and rejection: his craving for ‘a combination of [...] fraternal fellowship and feminine nurture’, reflected in his relationships with the Wordsworths, the Morgans, the Gillmans. It was this, Jane Spencer argues in her recent study of literary kinship, which Coleridge

² John Worthen, *The Gang: the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 103. Worthen takes issue, in particular, with Richard Holmes’s ‘sexually-determined interpretations’ (p. 107). In developing a narrative of Coleridge’s relationship with Sara Hutchinson, Worthen argues, ‘what biographers and critics treat as biographical source material simply isn’t. The poetry passages do not have the kind of relation to each other which might characterise “re-workings of a series of rapturous incidents”’, and to bring them into the kind of close relationship which biography needs, one has to ignore everything contradictory of such a reading. As its title suggests, *The Day-Dream* offers a fancy, not a reality’ (p. 103).

³ Worthen, p. 106.

⁴ Eric G. Wilson, *Coleridge’s Melancholia* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2005), p. 94.

⁵ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and The Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 172.

⁶ See Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 191-3; and Molly Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love* (London: Gollancz, 1986), p. 195.

‘expected from his friendship with Southey and his marriage to Sara Fricker.’⁷ Taylor emphasises the coercive influence of Southey in precipitating the marriage, rather than Coleridge’s psychological imperatives: ‘Robert Southey’s small, hard, prudential will [...] bore down on Coleridge, forcing him to take his own leavings⁸ and breaking his spirit’ (21).

In approaching Coleridge’s relationships, it is difficult for biographers and critics to avoid taking sides: John Worthen and Adam Sisman,⁹ for example, have drawn attention to this problem. In treating the collaboration and creative interactions of Coleridge and Wordsworth, each has adopted a methodology which avoids the distortions of bias. Coleridge’s marriage would also appear to be an area in which it is difficult to remain neutral, as Taylor’s book shows. She presents a wholly negative characterization of Coleridge’s wife, at odds with the sympathetic portraits given by Molly Lefebure and, more recently, Kathleen Jones.¹⁰ These biographers portray Sara Coleridge as an able, intellectually independent woman, heroically and cheerfully determined, struggling resiliently for her children against the poverty and repeated humiliations inflicted by her husband. Taylor’s Sara Coleridge is excessively concerned with ‘prudence and respectability’, physically cold and unaffectionate,¹¹ critical and disapproving of her husband’s endeavours; a presence in his life wholly inimical to emotional, intellectual and moral fulfilment. Taylor contrasts the unappealing coldness of Sara Coleridge with the ‘warmth, music and personal integrity of Sara Hutchinson’ (41).

It is debateable whether these were qualities the real Sara Hutchinson possessed, or were constructed by Coleridge in his idea of her. Coleridge’s daughter’s view of both women is strikingly different: her mother was ‘honest [...] lively-minded, affectionate’;¹² Sara Hutchinson, ‘devoid of grace and dignity’.¹³ Taylor presents a convincing view, nonetheless, of how Coleridge’s entrapment within a loveless marriage influenced his explorations of ‘how selves are made and lost’ (60). She discusses *Christabel*, a poetic ‘meditation on the vulnerabilities of will and agency [...] and] in many ways a female version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’ (60), from this perspective, as the crushing of a fragile emerging female identity; the character, as her suffering creator, undergoes a silencing of self. An interesting detail with respect to this silencing is Taylor’s remark that Sir Leoline’s ‘censoring’ of Bard Bracy renders

⁷ Jane Spencer, *Literary Relations: Kinship and The Canon, 1660-1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 168.

⁸ Sara had been Southey’s favourite of the Fricker girls before his sudden decision to transfer affections and marry Edith (22).

⁹ Adam Sisman, *The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (London: Harper Collins, 2006). John Worthen, *The Gang*, cited above.

¹⁰ Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets* (London: Virago, 1998). Molly Lefebure, *A Bondage of Love*, cited above.

¹¹ A different take on Sarah’s ‘coldness’ in ‘her feelings of animal love’ is suggested by Lefebure in *A Bondage of Love*: ‘There is a strong possibility that Sara, to demonstrate her disapproval of her husband’s enthusiasm for Miss Hutchinson, had had recourse to the strategy of Lysistrata’ (p. 145).

¹² Sara Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (London: Henry S. King, 1873), II, 233.

¹³ Sara Coleridge, *Autobiography*, reprinted in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 262.

Christabel a 'political prisoner' (70).

A central argument of the book is that Coleridge's imprisonment within a desolate marriage was a matter neither of ethical choice, nor indolent passivity: his capacity for love, the desire for union with his 'dearest beloved darling', were thwarted by 'the law of the land' (125). Ironically, soon after meeting Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge attended two weeks of parliamentary debates on the divorce laws in late March 1801, as a reporter for the *Morning Post*. These debates would have emphasized forcibly to Coleridge the impossibility of his ever being able to effect a legal dissolution of his marriage. This fascinating and illuminating discussion, of what Taylor shows to have been a key context of Coleridge's life, overturns a commonly-held view, stated for example by Whalley, that Coleridge 'refused to consider divorce'.¹⁴ Even for the wealthiest men in the country, the law made divorce a deeply, in effect, prohibitively humiliating process, as well as immensely expensive; and the sole ground on which a man could sue for divorce was a wife's adultery. For the lower classes, 'wife-sale', as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, was the method of dissolving an incompatible partnership. A wife could sue for divorce only if her husband had been caught in the act of adultery, as when Hazlitt contrived to be caught 'in flagrante' with a prostitute in Scotland, in order to secure the dissolution of his marriage with Sarah Stoddart.¹⁵ While separation was extremely difficult and humiliating for Coleridge and his family, divorce would have been absolutely impossible, far beyond his social and financial range. Taylor reminds us that even Byron 'did not use his lordly rights to sue for parliamentary divorce'; and, during his years of exile, he was, like Coleridge, 'only separated' (141).

Taylor examines how social and legal attitudes towards women had hardened during the eighteenth century, so that, in Godwin's words, marriage had become 'an affair of property, and the worst of all properties' (131). When a woman married, she surrendered her separate legal rights, her property passed to her husband, and she could make no will: her individuality was, in effect, obliterated in common law. In the last third of his life, living, as Taylor puts it in her final chapter, among 'communities of women' (157), Coleridge was thoroughly and compassionately aware of the ways in which female identity was susceptible to suppression by the institutions of society. Taylor shows how his experiences of love and loss, his sensitive observation and listening, led the 'Sage of Highgate' to discuss, not only metaphysical wisdom, but issues of love, marriage and personhood with the young men and women within the household circle. He summarises for his young friends' guidance a lifetime's meditation on personal identity, and the implications of these ideas for their lives; particularly, the choices about love and marriage that would soon be facing them. Taylor's insights into this late phase of Coleridge's

¹⁴ Whalley, p. 65.

¹⁵ See A. C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of The Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), pp. 275–280.

interactions with women, and his attitudes towards them, are particularly illuminating: not only do they emphasize significant lines of continuity in the development of earlier Coleridgean themes; they counterbalance the stereotype of the aged Coleridge as a 'sublime' and remote 'dreamer', lost on 'high seas of theosophic philosophy, the hazy infinitude of Kantian transcendentalism'.¹⁶ Taylor's Coleridge of Highgate is a much more wordly, accessible and engaging figure.

Coleridge advises his young female friends that, because a mistaken marriage choice is irrevocable, morally poisonous and debilitating, a woman should marry a man who has the capacity to be a 'Soul-Mate', not merely a 'House or [...] Yoke-mate' (172). Taylor shows that Coleridge's views in this respect refer directly to Milton's argument, in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, 'that no one is lonelier than an unhappily married person' (173). Coleridge advises, therefore, that a woman should thoroughly and critically examine a prospective partner's character before marriage; and ensure that, once married, she will be afforded respectful space for the fulfilled development of her individuality. However, the elderly Coleridge's 'most consistent advice is not to marry at all' (180). While experience has created in him the sense that love is an ever-unsatisfied craving, he lives in an affectionate and sociable contentment, extending the lifelong discourse he has enjoyed with many women on multiple levels. This sympathetic and dynamic interaction leads him to develop social, political and educational views, according to which reverence for women's personhood and free-agency is a fundamental condition for the healthy functioning of a civilized culture. In an essay of 1828, for example, Coleridge characterised a culture of 'excessive manliness' as a symptom both of contempt for women and deficient sexuality (184). 'Sexual energy', by contrast, he associated with respect for women; remembering, no doubt, his intimacy with Mary Evans and Sara Hutchinson, based on moral and intellectual communion, in harmony with ardent sensual passion.

Anya Taylor's book is refreshingly original and impressively erudite. In presenting biographical and critical interpretations that are sometimes controversial, invariably stimulating, Taylor acknowledges where she differs from other views; and the detailed notes are excellent in assisting further investigation. Above all, the book invites the reader to revisit well-known texts, such as *Christabel*; to reconsider, for example, *A Letter to Sara Hutchinson* and *Dejection: An Ode* in relation to *Lines Written in A Concert Room*; to discover relatively disregarded texts, such as *Love, The Keepsake*; or *The Improvisatore* and *The Garden of Boccaccio*, as late examples. Taylor encourages us to read and re-read, and enjoy afresh in the light of the new contexts and interpretations she suggests. The book is energized throughout by the author's inspiring commitment to Coleridge's humane generosity in his conceptions of gender and personhood; and to the intense beauty, the vibrant sensitivity, of his apprehension of love:

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling*, in Thomas Carlyle, *Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 318.

Love unutterable fills my whole Spirit, so that every fibre of my Heart, nay, of my whole frame seems to tremble under its perpetual touch and sweet pressure, like the string of a Lute. (121)

Anya Taylor remarks of this notebook entry of 1808 that it is 'more beautiful than most people's poems'.