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Sara Coleridge: A Poet Hidden

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FOR MOST OF HER ADULT LIFE, Sara Coleridge, daughter of Samuel Taylor, wrote well over 3,000 words a day. She wrote children's stories and verses, adult poetry and essays on religion, politics and psychology. She edited and wrote introductions to numerous volumes of her father's. Her literary criticism was published in journals and in her prolific correspondence she communicated with many of the greatest minds of the first half of the nineteenth century. She was a fearsomely intelligent, well-connected and talented writer, yet even her first biographer, E L Griggs, described her as a 'minor figure'.¹ She is known now, if at all, solely as an interesting footnote to her father's life and work. According to Virginia Woolf this was because Sara 'was diffuse, unable to conclude, and without the magic that does instead of a conclusion.'²

There are critics, particularly feminist critics, who have found this frustrating. To Bradford Keyes Mudge writing in the 1980s and Kathleen Jones in the 1990s it seemed clear that because Sara Coleridge attempted to work in man's world, her reputation has been unfairly diminished.³

I was initially sympathetic to their point of view. It is easy to argue that Sara ought to be better-known. Peter Swaab, who recently edited a collection of her poetry, says that her best verses have 'weight and intensity', she was, as he argues a 'considerable poet, passionate, versatile and brainy: "uncommonly good" indeed'.⁴ Her fiction, too, has won praise in more recent decades: the long fairy-tale, *Phantasmion*, has been described not only as an important precursor to *The Lord of the Rings*, but also by science-fiction aficionados as an early and influential example of that genre.⁵ She was a remarkably skilful editor too. Kathleen Coburn,⁶ who dedicated much of her professional life to editing S T Coleridge's notebooks, concluded that 'Sara Coleridge was probably the most learned of her father's editors; and she is one who cannot, so far as I know, be charged with tampering with any text'. What is more, as an essayist

1 Earl Leslie Griggs, *Coleridge Fille: A Biography of Sara Coleridge* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1940), vii.

2 Virginia Woolf, 'Sara Coleridge', *Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 116.

3 Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1989) and Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets* (London: Virago, 1997).

4 Sara Coleridge, *Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Peter Swaab (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), p.2.

5 See for example: Peter Hunt and Dennis Butts, *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.92, or John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 183. It is also interesting to see how often Sara Coleridge's name appears on websites created by science fiction fanatics and experts, for example 'estranghero' (2006). *Forgotten Classic Fantasy Discussion*. Available at <http://www.sffworld.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-267.html%3Cbr%20/t-243-p-15.html>.

6 Quoted in Shirley Watters, 'Sara Coleridge and Phantasmion', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 10 (1997): 22-38. Norman Fruman likewise argued: 'Sara Coleridge's intelligence, energy, learning, and above all her willingness to lay damaging materials clearly before the reader, have not only never received anything like the praise they deserve, but she has sometimes been patronised by professional scholars. Her sensitivity to the distorting pressures of personal bias – all the more remarkable in her acutely difficult psychological position as the poets daughter – has not been approached by any subsequent editor.' (Norman Fruman, 'Review Essay: Aids to Reflection on the New Biographia', *Studies in Romanticism*, 24 (1985), pp. 141-2.)

she is astute and learned. Whether writing on religion, literature or the workings of the human mind she continues to provide material for scholarly study. Research for his scholarly articles on Sara's religious writing has lead Jeffrey Barbeau to conclude that she 'was not only a writer, translator, and an editor of her father's works, but also a theologian' – in her own right.⁷

Mudge made a case for Sara's possessing a kind of greatness not recognised by Woolf or Griggs who both 'employ a system of valuation... that presupposes the necessity of public performance, of "great works" produced by artistic or intellectual "genius"'. 'That system' argued Mudge, 'cannot accommodate the fragmentary and miscellaneous remains of Sara Coleridge without immediately pronouncing them a failure.'⁸

Taking such a view as your starting point, it then becomes easy to argue that Sara Coleridge was thwarted by the misogyny of her patriarchal society. There are certainly no shortage of patriarchs to blame. Both her father (or fathers) and later her husband can be made to fit this story. Southey, in whose house Sara was brought up and whom she referred to as her 'uncle-father', has achieved notoriety in his afterlife for his advice to Charlotte Bronte: 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be.'⁹ Of almost equal influence over Sara growing up was William Wordsworth, her 'Father-in-Spirit', the man whom she knew 'as well as I have ever known anyone in the world—more intimately than I knew my father, and as intimately as I knew my Uncle Southey'. Wordsworth we could see as the *über-patriarch*: a man who cultivated a house-full of adoring women whose intelligence, energy and even sanity were subsumed into enabling his own production of poetry. And that is not even to mention the way he abandoned his French daughter and mistress or, for years, forbade his legitimate daughter from marrying the man she loved. So too there was Sara's real, that is biological, father, Coleridge. He was a largely absent figure in her life, but a deeply influential one who once wrote: 'The perfection of every woman is to be characterless. Creatures who, though they may not understand you... always feel you and feel with you'.¹⁰

Finally, and especially, came Sara's 'husband-patriarch', Henry Nelson Coleridge. Henry, Sara's first cousin, was first attracted to her for the lustre of her beauty and the allure of her famous father (his adored Uncle). My view of him as a swamping boorish figure—a lawyer—who did not appreciate his wife's worth and did not demonstrate intellectual respect for any woman, was confirmed on my initial reading of an article he published anonymously in the *Quarterly Review* in 1840. In it Henry risked turning the ink 'blue' by reviewing the work of nine 'poetesses'. He is kind enough to offer helpful advice, suggesting to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that 'a little more reverence of expression upon all subjects would be more becoming and less energetic'. Her version of Prometheus, he tells his readers, is 'a remarkable performance

⁷ Jeffrey Barbeau, 'Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 28 (Winter 2006), 29-37.

⁸ Mudge, p. 6.

⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), pp. 172-3.

¹⁰ Coleridge Notebook, quoted in *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. 121.

for a young lady: but it is not a good translation in and by itself. It is too frequently uncouth without being faithful'. He informs Arabella Brooke that: 'with a little care and discipline her versification would be fine'.¹¹ And so on.

Henry's penultimate poetess in the Quarterly article was Sara, and he flatters her for her Fairy-Tale *Phantasmion*. On discovering that this article was by him—and as far as I can ascertain Sara was unaware of this at least until after his death—I felt that it showed, within a marriage, the gender dynamic at play in wider society. From those famous separate spheres men would patronise, misunderstand and prettily flatter, without engaging seriously with women who remained trapped in their sphere.

Surely here, as Mudge said, was the cause of Sara's chronic hysteria, the 'chains' she said felt about her in married life, and her unfulfilled potential. It is worth quoting here from her poem of 1833 which contains lines such as: 'The sickening fears that overpower/ This crushed but struggling heart of mine', and ends:

My griefs are not to be expressed:
Affection's voice can charm no more:
I ne'er shall find a steady rest,
Till, torn from all I love the best,
I seek the distant unknown shore.

The negative cycle of hysteria, opium, addiction and depression all comes back, it seems, to being female—and specifically to having moved from a house presided over by Southey, to one presided over by Henry.

Initially, then, I was sympathetic to this broadly feminist argument. Having been drawn to the story of Sara and spent a great deal of time researching her life and works, one of the things I hoped to do was to reiterate the sense of injustice that Mudge so keenly felt. Sara could not ever really achieve because like other women of her class and generation she had been brought up to believe in 'traditional female selflessness and marriage as their only suitable employment'.¹² The crippling sense of duty meant that she could never pursue a writing career with the single-minded determination necessary for achieving success. Yet, after spending time with Sara's archives (most of which are now in the Harry Ransom Centre, Austin, Texas), I was forced to reassess my view of her relationships with Henry and the other men in her life. The picture of 'Sara-as-Victim' which I had drawn primarily as a result of the fragmentary nature of her literary output would no longer quite do. I was forced to acknowledge that attempting to explain from biography why one author achieves, or does not achieve, 'greatness' and recognition is a deeply flawed exercise. It is one which can lead easily to a misreading of the subject's

¹¹ Anonymous, 'Modern English Poetesses' *The Quarterly Review*, Vol 66, June-September (London: John Murray, 1840), 374-418. The article was by H.N. Coleridge, though I can find no evidence that Sara discovered this until after his death.

¹² Mudge, p. 2.

life, work and times.

What Sara's writing life can more usefully show is how, viewed in context, as Peter Swaab has said, her writing life was a success.¹³ The context of that life was certainly bound by duty, but within those bounds she had a remarkable freedom and her example shows how a woman's life, judged by contemporary standards, could be enormously rich and varied.

Whilst in Austin I realised that a portrait very different from the sketch I gave earlier can, and should, be painted of the men in Sara's life. As I came to understand more about the dynamic of her relationship with her husband I was forced to reread the article I had earlier felt showed Henry in such a poor light. Henry was correct in pointing out that women formed a significant part of the literary scene. And Henry, when one examines their marriage, was constantly trying to push Sara towards fulfilling her potential. It was he who 'insisted' she publish her children's verses, he who reassured her about the reception of *Phantasmion*, and he who had the deepest respect for her literary skills. When she edited his translation of Homer, he trusted her enough to ask her to send it directly to the publishers for him once she had made her alterations.¹⁴

His article is full of expressions which sound today 'sexist', but the point of his essay is in fact deeply feminist. 'We are convinced', he wrote, 'that we render Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley—for whose talents we feel a sincere respect—a real service, when we denounce it [her 'mistaken writing'] for utter condemnation.' He was correct: by censuring Wortley for her poor metre, he was taking her work seriously. And his article was after all published in that most Tory of publications, the *Quarterly Review*. It was part of a wider movement which was helping to create a space in which Sara—and women like her—*could* write. It seems he was even keen she step out of her anonymity. *Phantasmion*, he wrote in the *Quarterly Review*, was a work which would have pleased the ear of 'the Coleridge'—a heavy hint as to Sara's identity which she had not made public. Sara's brothers, too, were keen that she publish, and when she and Derwent edited a volume of STC's poems which was not actually printed until Sara had died, he did not allow her to remain in obscurity but wrote in the advertisement to the edition: 'At her earnest request, my name appears with hers on the title-page, but the assistance rendered by me has been, in fact, little more than mechanical.'¹⁵

Sara lived amongst men who were, in fact, unusually supportive of female authorship. Southey may have discouraged Charlotte Brontë from taking up a literary career but, as Dennis Low points out in the *Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets*, he had begun that letter of advice by saying that he felt 'bound in duty to caution every young *man* [my emphasis] who applies as an aspirant to me for encouragement and advice against taking such a course'.¹⁶ It was in fact Southey who first suggested Sara try her hand at translation and he who

¹³ Swaab, p.14.

¹⁴ HNC to SC, 28th August 1834, Harry Ransom Humanities Centre.

¹⁵ Mudge, p. 174.

¹⁶ Quoted in Dennis Low, *The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 23.

supported her in the work and its publication. Southey, with Wordsworth and Mrs Coleridge, was responsible for her phenomenal education—6 languages including the classics—and exposure to his unparalleled library. Wordsworth took her seriously, and though Coleridge had little daily influence over his daughter, her education was the one area in which he did become involved. He was deeply impressed by her translations. When she married, he decided to bequeath her his polyglot volume of the *Georgics* on the grounds that this was the best way of ‘marking my sense of the Talent and Industry that have made her the master of the Six Languages comprised in the volume.’¹⁷ Southey, like Coleridge and the other Pantisocrats, had been ardent supporters of Wollstonecraft and all three poets were enthusiastic backers of a number of female protégées. They had helped create an England which, as Henry said in the *Quarterly*, was not exclusively a man’s world—at least in the publishing arena. As Low points out, the literary market place of the 1820s and 30s was ‘dominated by women writers.’¹⁸ Then, as now, the inevitable time and health constraints which came with motherhood brought their own challenges to women’s careers, but many have succeeded under harder conditions than Sara’s—Felicia Hemans for example—while many men, Hartley Coleridge perhaps, have struggled with less responsibility.

So what can Sara’s writing tell us about her life and the lives of women of her period? Why did she not pursue a writing career with more constancy of purpose? Why did she choose editing when she believed and resented the fact that ‘no one can have any conception of the trouble and labour’ involved and that ‘There is no more thankless task than that of an editor’.¹⁹ Why translation and fairytale when she knew there was no market? Why appear to hide her extremely adult poems between neat rhyming couplets of children’s verse about seasons and picking berries? Why write prolific essays but publish very few?

There is very little evidence that Sara saw herself as a victim or as unfulfilled as a writer. Certainly she was not an entirely happy or healthy individual but the simple pop-psychology of linking this to her frustrated writing career would be an error. We must not confuse our frustration at Victorian attitudes with the belief that she was frustrated. Sara’s writing life is a demonstration of a positive decision to honour the various roles she played with loyalty and with love—she ‘had it all’.

Sara was deeply loyal to her father. Terrier-like she defended him from the numerous articles which came in the wake of de Quincey’s vicious denunciations, accusing him of everything from abandoning his family to plagiarism in his work (accusations which had at least some basis in truth). The defence entailed first studying and understanding both his life and his writings and then editing them into an acceptably Tory Christian shape. She

¹⁷ Griggs, Earl Leslie ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), VI, no. 1592 and 1592n.

¹⁸ Low, p.29.

¹⁹ *Coleridge Fille*, pp. 155-6.

set about trying to make him coherent: yet her agenda as a daughter and a middle-class Victorian meant she had the further complication of needing to re-present him as an upholder of Christian orthodoxy who not only was *not* a radical dissenter but also a man who would have regretted the Anglo-Catholicism of the mid-nineteenth century. She described her defence as a 'battle', and it was an exhausting, lonely and often unwinnable one. But it does not follow from this that she regretted the life she had chosen, as Mudge would suggest.²⁰ She struggled heroically and with at least partial success to establish a version of Coleridge the industrious intellectual Christian to displace the representations of the opium-fuelled reprobate which had become common.

Furthermore, Sara's editing of her father gave her an unrivalled position from which to write about her own convictions. In her introduction to *Essays on his Own Times* she begins by discussing her father's views but moves on to a thirty page discussion of her own views on Ireland.

Sara was able to write children's verses and stories and these fulfilled a maternal duty and pleasure. She worked with her husband to edit Coleridge's writing as well as Henry's articles. Studying her writing about her husband and her grief at his death makes it clear that this dynamic was of crucial importance within a loving and dutiful marriage. Her letters and the essays on 'psychology' fulfilled her duty as a friend and her religious essays her duty as a Christian.

The word 'duty' has become tainted in recent years, and in relation to the women's movement it is often assumed to be synonymous with martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Sara Coleridge is an attractive subject to the biographer and critic because so much of what she says is brilliant and resonant.²¹ Her low profile has led to the assumption that she was unfairly thwarted. If, as I argue, this is not the case, then Sara's life of writing can serve to remind us not of how similar our time is to hers, but how different.

²⁰ Mudge, p.17, suggests that Sara 'spent the greater part of her life "putting in order a literary house" only to realise on her deathbed that she could have built her own'. I find no sense of any such deathbed regret in any of Sara's writing.

²¹ My joint biography of Sara Coleridge and her friend Dora Wordsworth (daughter of William Wordsworth) will be published in 2011. Both women have similarly low profiles today, but the story of their lives is moving and important.