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Shadowy Nobodies and other Minutiae: Coleridge's Originality

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‘to find such shadowy nobodies, as cherub-winged DEATH, Trees of HOPE, bare-bosom’d AFFECTION, & simpering PEACE—makes one’s blood circulate like ipecacuanha. A young man by strong feelings is impelled to write on a particular subject . . . He has such a high idea of what Poetry ought to be, that he cannot conceive that such things as his natural emotions may be allowed to find a place in it.’

(CL I 333, July 1797, on *Monody on the death of Chatterton*)

THIS ESSAY considers two questions: first, why did Coleridge write so much indifferent or bad verse before 1798? And second, why did he make such a mess of the early series of lectures on Shakespeare? The answers sketched here to these questions point to a parallel between them.

Most of us take it for granted that we live in fast times, a culture of speeding cars, instant gratifications, computers, BlackBerrys, cell-phones, air-travel, and so on. But in some ways things have slowed down—many students will be getting their qualifications in business studies, or as lawyer or doctor or teacher when well into their twenties or older. We live on average longer, and have a different concept of time from that common in 1772, when Coleridge was born. By the age of twenty-five he had studied at Cambridge, won a prize for a Greek ode on the slave trade, spent time as a light dragoon and been discharged as ‘insane’ (CL I 76), planned pantisocracy and published *The Fall of Robespierre* with Southey, got engaged and married, lectured on revealed religion and on politics, preached as a Unitarian, written *Osorio*, published various prose works, including 10 numbers of his periodical *The Watchman*, and *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796, expanded 1797), travelled much, and written more than 200 surviving letters. He had also read omnivorously. We could say this period culminated in *This Lime-tree Bower* (1797, published 1800), which is poem number 156 in his *Poetical Works*, the scope of which can now be studied in the fine edition (PW) by J. C. C. Mays. It seems from a modern perspective that Coleridge was in a great hurry, someone of enormous intellectual energy, an inquiring spirit, and physical energy, as Dorothy Wordsworth reminds us in her recollection of his arrival in Somerset: ‘he did not keep to the high road, but leaped over a gate and bounded down a pathless field by which he cut off an angle’.¹ He also was trying to make a living, having married Sara Fricker in 1795, and become a father in 1796 at the age of 23.

Writing, preaching, lecturing, publishing, travelling, as in his tour of the midlands in 1796 to preach and raise funds for *The Watchman*, kept Coleridge frantically busy and also gave him prominence. But in his rush to succeed he wrote a good deal of bad and indifferent verse. His early poems were written

¹ Cited in Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 149.

during a period of great political turbulence: he was not quite seventeen when the French Revolution broke out in 1789, and the following years brought the rise of the Jacobins and the reign of terror in France, culminating in the execution of Robespierre in 1794. Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed in 1793, France declared war, and fears of rebellion in England provoked the suspension of habeas corpus and the arrest of radicals for treason. Coleridge was deeply engaged with the political problems of the time, and delivered his series of political lectures in Bristol in 1795 on the theme of revolutions past and present. The age seemed to call for poems that would respond to such concerns, and Coleridge obliged with *Religious Musings*, begun in 1794, a poem which offers a vision of faith and piety as replacing the violence of the French Revolution with a society bound together as 'a vast family of Love'. In April 1796, when his first collection, *Poems on Various Subjects*, was published, Coleridge repeated to several friends in letters, 'I rest for all my poetical credit on the *Religious Musings*'. (CL I.197, 203, 205).

His ambition as a poet in an age of political turmoil, revolution and war called for poetry on major themes, and *Religious Musings* is well described by Mays as 'a repository of his beliefs and cherished opinions' (PW I 173), in relation to society, religion and politics. In composing such a poem Coleridge had no tradition to aid him. There had been no national alarms for decades, and wars fought overseas, most recently the American war of independence (1775-1783) had little impact on life in Britain. Recent years had been notable for the emergence of female poets like Anna Letitia Barbauld, Anna Seward and Charlotte Smith, who were troubled by the slave trade, but this period offered mainly meditative and often melancholy minor poems on nature or domestic topics written in an eighteenth-century idiom still heavily influenced by Milton, Thomson and Gray. Coleridge's chosen models were Mark Akenside, whose *Pleasures of the Imagination* provided an epigraph for *Religious Musings*, and William Lisle Bowles, whose sonnets excited him at school when he was seventeen (BL I 13-15). In *Biographia Literaria* he criticized 'the general style of composition that was at that time deemed poetry' with some scorn, reserving praise only for Cowper, whose *The Task* (1785) he does not appear to have known until 1796, and Bowles as combining 'natural thoughts with natural diction' (BL I 25). He does not seem to have been aware of the work of William Blake.²

The verse of Mark Akenside and William Lisle Bowles, was rooted in eighteenth century pastoral and elegiac forms. While he was at Cambridge in 1792 he wrote to Mary Evans promising to send her 'some delicious poetry lately published by the exquisite Bowles' (CL I 29). He later drew her attention to 'the exquisite description of HOPE... and of FORTITUDE' in Bowles's 'Monody written at Matlock' (1791). This poem, addressed to the River Derwent, also personifies Matlock itself, Fancy, Indolence, Humanity, Ocean,

² For a different perspective on Coleridge's early development, considered as a lyric poet, see Paul Sheats, 'Young Coleridge and the Idea of Lyric', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 20 (Winter, 2002), 14-31.

Hope, Time, Fortitude, Peace, Virtue, Folly, Ambition, and War. In December 1794 Coleridge wrote to Southey to say 'Your Poems & Bowles are my only morning Companions' (CL I 133). In November 1796 he put together and had printed in 200 copies a collection of sonnets 'to bind up with Bowles's' (CL I 252), including some of his own and others by Lamb, Southey, Lloyd, Charlotte Smith, Anna Seward, and other writers. He presented a copy of Bowles's poems to Mrs Thelwall a month later, 'a Volume', he wrote, 'which has given me more pleasure, and done my heart more good, than all the other books I ever read, excepting my Bible' (CL I 287).

The poems of Bowles as presented in the first volume of the edition Coleridge refers to in a letter of 1802,³ by which time he realized that he had allowed his admiration of Bowles 'to bubble up too often on the surface' of his own poems (CL II 855), begin with thirty sonnets. For a time Coleridge became addicted to the form, but the less than enthusiastic comments on his sonnets by John Thelwall late in 1796 seem to have alerted him to become more critical of his own work, and realize 'In some (indeed in many of my poems,) there is a garishness & swell of diction, which I hope, that my poems in future, if I write any, will be clear of' (CL I.278); he confessed in his reply that his poetry frequently deviated 'from nature and simplicity' (a charge Thelwall made), though he defended Bowles as 'the only *always-natural* poet in our Language' (CL I.278). Thelwall had seen Della-Cruscan elements in the verse of Bowles, which upset Coleridge, though now the sentimental, melancholy sonnets of Bowles do appear tinged with some of the defects of that style, and hardly justify Coleridge's epithet 'always-natural'. Consider, for example, Sonnet 10, 'At Ostend, Landing' (1787), which begins:

The orient beam illumes the parting oar—
 From yonder azure track, emerging white,
 The earliest sail slow gains upon the sight,
 And the blue wave comes rippling to the shore—
 Meantime far off the rear of darkness flies:

There are simple and natural lines in Bowles's sonnets, but his style and vocabulary look backward as derived from earlier poetic usage. So in the first line 'illumes' was a poetic shortening of 'illumines', while 'orient beam' and 'azure track' also belong with a poetic vocabulary that was obsolescent. His constructions can be confusing too, as here the poem is called 'Landing', yet begins with the 'parting oar', which might have to do with separating waves, or with a departing rowboat that has brought passengers to land. The image of the 'rear of darkness' is drawn from *L'Allegro*, where, like a warrior guarding his hens, 'the cock with lively din/ Scatters the rear of darkness thin'. In such poems Bowles draws his images from Milton and his cadences from Gray's *Elegy*, ending this sonnet with the lines:

³ Reverend W. L. Bowles, *Sonnets, and other Poems* (2 vols., 1802 and 1803)

The pealing bell
Speaks of the hour that stays not—and the day
To life's sad turmoils calls my heart away.

Influenced by Bowles's sonnets, in his early verse Coleridge often imitated such a derivative style.

In his poems on more general or public themes Bowles was fond of personified abstractions, perhaps in an effort to give Miltonic weight to his lines, but they now seem ponderous and inert, like the glimpse of the 'mysterious bosom' of truth in Akenside's *Pleasures of the Imagination*, also a favorite of the young Coleridge:

Where Virtue, rising from the awful depth
Of Truth's mysterious bosom, doth forsake
The unadorn'd conditions of her birth;
And dressed by Fancy in ten thousand hues,
Assumes a various feature... (Book 1, 448-52)

Coleridge wrote a grateful sonnet to Bowles (1794, reworked 1796) thanking him for his 'mild and manliest melancholy' (PW I 1 163), and often fell easily into his sort of style, as for example in 'Absence' (PW I 1 99):

Imagination! Mistress of my lore!
Where shall mine eye thy elfin haunt explore?
Dost thou on yon rich cloud thy pinions bright
Embathe in amber-glowing floods of light?
Or, wild of plume, pursue the track of day
In other worlds to hail the morning ray?

Here the personification of 'Imagination' and derivative terms like 'elfin', from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and 'embathe' borrowed, I suspect, from Milton's *Comus*, as well as 'pinions' and 'plume', both listed in the *OED* as chiefly poetical in usage, recall the backward-looking style of Coleridge's early models. Even so, he enjoyed comic verse and was capable of mocking his own routine verse, as in his parody of an earlier poem on 'Absence' (PW I 1 61), which begins

Where grac'd with many a classic spoil
Cam rolls his reverend stream along...
'Absence: An Ode' (1791-3).

In his 'Fragment found in a Mathematical Lecture room' (1792: PW I 1 69) this image becomes

Where deep in mud Cam rolls his reverend Stream

And Bog and Desolation reign supreme,—
 The personification of ‘Bog’ and ‘Desolation’ show him as aware that such images could topple into absurdity. However, in his whirlwind existence he was continually busy, and always anxious about making a living until his joking plea beginning, ‘Grant me a Patron, gracious Heaven!’ (PW I 1 254) was answered by the generosity of Thomas and Josiah Wedgwood at the end of 1797. In such circumstances he spawned like a herring not merely projects (as Southey said in 1802, CL II 829-30), but also poems, and made use of a mental grab-bag of conventional images and an outworn vocabulary.

For some years he staked his reputation as a poet, on what may be called his public poetry, works such as *Religious Musings* (1794-7), *The Destiny of Nations* (1795 and later), and *Ode on the Departing Year* (1796). In such poems he frequently falls into a sort of quasi-Miltonic heroics that morph into Gothic melodramatics, as in *Religious Musings*:

But that we roam unconscious, or with hearts
 Unfeeling of our universal Sire,
 And that in his vast family no Cain
 Injures uninjured (in her best-aimed blow
 Victorious MURDER a blind Suicide)
 Haply for this some younger Angel now
 Looks down on Human Nature: and behold!
 A sea of blood bestrewed with wrecks, where mad
 Embattling INTERESTS on each other rush
 With unhelm'd rage! (PW I 1 179-80)

‘Unhelmed’, meaning ungoverned, revives a seventeenth-century usage, (like ‘darkling’ a few lines earlier, taken from Milton). But Murder is hardly ‘victorious’ if equated with suicide, and ‘Interests’ is too vague a term to relate to a ‘sea of blood’, suggesting parliament or the stock exchange rather than armed combat.

Late in 1796 C published his *Ode on the Departing Year* as a separate pamphlet, pleased with it, and believing it did ‘credit to the Author of Religious Musings’ (CL I 292-3). But he soon accepted Thelwall’s criticism of the image of the birth of nature:

Seiz'd in sore travail and portentous birth
 (Her eyeballs flashing a pernicious glare)
 Sick NATURE struggles! Hark—her pangs increase!
 Her groans are horrible! But o! most fair
 The promis'd Twins she bears—EQUALITY and PEACE!
 (PW I 1 305-6)

These lines Coleridge cut after 1797, finding them ‘ludicrous & disgusting’ (CL I 307), and he described the poem as a ‘rant of turgid obscurity’ in a letter to Joseph Cottle (PW I 302), though he continued to include it in his published

poetry.

During this time, in 1796, Coleridge also wrote some short poems that were natural and simple, like his sonnet to the River Otter (PW I 1 299)—imitating Bowles's sonnets addressed to various rivers, especially the one to the River Itchin, but with a difference. In the sonnet by Bowles the emotion is generalized as in a formal exercise ('my heart has sigh'd/ As Youth, and Hope's delusive gleams, flew fast'), whereas in Coleridge's poem it is deeply felt, culminating in the last line, 'Ah! that once more I were a careless child!' But among all the many kinds of verse Coleridge attempted during these early years he thought his most important achievement lay in poems like *Religious Musings*. He spent much effort in converting his contributions to Southey's *Joan of Arc* into *The Destiny of Nations*, and as late as 1817 included this poem together with *Ode on the Departing Year*, as examples of his best poems in *Sybilline Leaves*. These poems reflect his radical political opinions and rely on personified abstractions (Nature, Slaughter, Equality, Murder, Madness, Guilt and Destruction to name some of those in the Ode) to carry the burden of their message. However melodramatic they are, these abstractions tend to remain inert on the page because the poet has no personal emotional investment in them.

The main factor producing Coleridge's transformation in 1796-7 was his drift from his early Jacobinism, the changes in his beliefs and opinions, political and religious, as recorded in BL I 200, when he made the move to Nether Stowey at the beginning of 1797 and found himself 'all afloat' in doubts concerning the 'foundations of religion and morals'. He had allowed the justice of Thelwall's criticisms of his poetry in 1796, admitting to 'a rage, & affectation of double epithets' (CL I 215), while being praised by Wordsworth and Lamb for *Religious Musings*, which Lamb wrote in February 1797 was 'the noblest poem in the language, next after the *Paradise Lost*'.⁴ Coleridge continued to tinker with this poem and included a revised version in his *Poems* (1803). But in December 1796 he published *The Eolian Harp*, describing it to Thelwall as 'my favorite of *my* poems' (CL I 295), and later (1797?) to Southey as 'the most perfect Poem, I ever wrote' (PW I 1 232). Much later, in a note written in a copy of *Sybilline Leaves* (1817), he would recognise this as the first of his conversation poems and a new species (PW I.1.232).⁵ In *The Eolian Harp* he discovered in the intimacy of addressing his wife, his 'pensive Sara', a mode of writing which did not deviate 'from nature & simplicity', as Thelwall had charged in relation to his collection of 1796, a mode which might be impassioned not only in his love for her, but in relation to the landscape around them as exciting religious feelings for the natural world and for God.

Coleridge's ambition as a poet until 1796 was centered on his public

⁴ The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb, ed. Edwin W Marrs, Jr. (3 vols., Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), I.87

⁵ Richard Gravil argues for a link between some passages in Thelwall's own verse and Coleridge's development of his conversation poems in 'The Somerset Sound; or The Darling Child of Speech', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, (NS 26, Winter 2005), 1-21.

poetry, and for years he believed, with support from friends like Charles Lamb, that works such as *Religious Musings* would bring him acclaim. Lamb thought this poem beyond criticism, and urged him to write an epic 'Nothing short of it can satisfy the vast capacity of poetic genius'. (Jan 10, 1797).⁶ No doubt the writing of his drama *Osorio* in 1797, which consisted of conversations, (one of them converted into *The Foster-Mother's Tale* for *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798) and the influence of Wordsworth when Coleridge moved to Somerset in that year, were important encouragements to him to write more in the mode of *The Eolian Harp*, as he did in the next few years in a series of works including *Frost at Midnight* and *The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem*. The nature and style of these poems, their immediacy and intensity of feeling, and their relative simplicity of style, abandoning the personifications and elevated mode of his public poems, mark Coleridge's emergence into mature individuality as a poet. The criticisms by Thelwall of his overpitched public poems were of great importance in weaning him from his reliance on Bowles, and his waning political radicalism and gradual return to religious orthodoxy also affected his development. His *Ode on the Departing Year*, written at the end of 1796, was a final attempt at inflated and grand public utterance, with the exception of *France: An Ode*, written in 1798 after the French conquest of Switzerland, a poem Coleridge came to despise as dull. The conversation poems mark a tremendous advance and establish his originality as a poet.

I now turn to Coleridge's development as a critic. An analogy with his maturing as a poet may be found in the development much later, from 1808, of his criticism of Shakespeare. As he began his career in poetry by writing under the influence of older poets, so when he was invited to present a course of twenty lectures at the Royal Institution in 1808, a course that was to launch his critical commentary on Shakespeare, he started with a hugely ambitious scheme to redefine the categories of earlier criticism and explain 'the Principles of Poetry conveyed and demonstrated in a series of Lectures— 1. On the genius & writings of Shakespeare...', as well as 'the source of our pleasures in the Fine Arts in the antithetical balance-loving nature of man, & the connection of such pleasures with moral excellence' (LL I 11-12). In his first lecture he offered a critique of Richard Payne Knight's *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, and having redefined taste, he proposed to reconsider 'the Words, Wit, Fancy, Imagination, Sublimity, the grand, the picturesque, the majestic—Each will receive the fullest development, which my mind can afford them' (LL I 30-31). He went on to add 'The *Good*, the *Beautiful*, the *Agreeable*' (LL I 36), but never explained how this grand revision of the principles of criticism would bear on Shakespeare. By the third lecture he was apologizing for boring his hearers, characteristically beginning Lecture 3 by questioning whether he should be feeling regret or remorse for doing so. Only scanty records survive of this course, which was interrupted by illness.

He felt a need to rebut the arguments of eighteenth-century critics of

⁶ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, I.95.

Shakespeare and their application of external rules in assessing Shakespeare's plays. His concern with general principles was no doubt related to this need, but provided no easy link to the plays. Three years later, in 1811, Coleridge hired the hall of the London Philosophical Society, proposing in his prospectus to give 15 lectures beginning with an introductory lecture on 'False Criticism' (LL I 179), and going on explain the 'principal *Characters*' of Shakespeare's plays. But in the advertisement for the first lecture he reverted to his 1808 scheme of lectures on Shakespeare and Milton 'in Illustration of the Principles of POETRY' (LL I 182). His first four lectures indeed seem to have been developed from the notes he made in 1808, and by the fifth, as Henry Crabb Robinson reported 'we have had four lectures, and are still in the prolegomena to the Shakesperian drama' (LL I 259). In Lecture 5 Coleridge began to speak on *Love's Labours Lost*, but soon digressed to an attack on Voltaire and things French, then the history of Russia, a discussion of metaphor, a defence of punning, a critique of the current fashion for poems on '*The Pleasures of Tea-drinking; The Pleasures of Wine-drinking; the Pleasures of Hope*', etc., and a scornful account of reviewers, before returning to the play at the end of the lecture, when he reminded his audience that 'he had taken the great names of Milton & Shakespeare rather for the purpose of illustrating great principles than for any minute examination of their works' (LL I 272-9). His next lecture, advertised as on *Romeo and Juliet*, in fact consisted of digressions and ranged over various topics including education, language, wit and fancy, and an impromptu outburst against Monk Lewis, and he postponed the discussion of the play, mainly on the topic of love and the difference between Romeo's love for Rosaline and his love for Juliet, that occupied him in Lectures 7 and 8. Charles Lamb attended this sixth lecture, and noted, with some amusement, that Coleridge said in his advertisement he would talk about the Nurse, 'and so he is delivering the lecture in the character of the nurse', while Crabb Robinson commented in his Diary that in Coleridge 'surpassed himself in the art of talking very amusingly with^t speaking at all on the subject to which the audience were especially invited' (LL I 283). Coleridge had discovered that he could be an entertainer, and had fun in improvising from his vast store of reading. It meant, however that he was forced to squeeze Richard III and Falstaff into one lecture, and Richard II and Hamlet into another in an effort to complete his promised coverage of Shakespeare.

This course came to an end in January 1812, and was successful enough to encourage Coleridge to offer two more courses in London in the spring of 1812, and to accept an invitation to present a further course at the Surrey Institution later in the year that was to be, like the 1811-12 lectures, on the principles of poetry in general, though, like all these series, including some commentary on Shakespeare. What notes survive show that he was much influenced by A. W. Schlegel, whose two volume *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (1809, 1811) had been presented to him in December 1811 (LL I 345). Schlegel provided Coleridge with a neat and effective way of describing

the form of a play by Shakespeare as growing from within organically like a plant and not imposed like mechanical regularity from without, terms which Coleridge seized on as relevant to his insistence on Shakespeare's consummate artistry. In all the courses so far Coleridge had started from general principles and had spoken of the plays as illustrating these principles. Then in 1813 at short notice he set up a course in Bristol in an effort to raise money to help his friends John and Mary Morgan, and, building on old lecture notes, began to focus more closely on the texts and characters in the plays. He took volumes of the edition of Shakespeare he was using, by Joseph Rann (6 volumes, 1786-94) and his copy of Schlegel's lectures into the lecture-room, where quoting from this work and commenting on it helped him to reconsider his own readings of favorite plays, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Richard II*, mainly in terms of the major characters.

If Schlegel stimulated Coleridge to focus more directly on the play-texts, he had little to do with the remarkable innovation in the final courses of lectures Coleridge delivered in London in 1818-1819. In his lectures as published Schlegel goes through the plays one by one writing a descriptive page or two on each and giving a somewhat more extended account of the tragedies, but in his late courses Coleridge did something quite new. His notes for the first lecture begin 'Once more, tho' in a somewhat different and I would fain believe in a more instructive form I have undertaken the task of criticizing the works of that great Dramatist' (LL II 263). He had given currency in 1817 to a concept of 'practical criticism' in his commentary on *Venus and Adonis* in BL, Chapter 15 (II 19), and it was with a 'particular and practical Criticism' in mind that he presented his late courses of lectures on literature (LL II 34). The term was taken over by I. A. Richards in 1929 as the title of a book that constituted a sort of manifesto for the 'New Criticism', the practice of close reading that was so influential in succeeding decades. Thus in his opening lecture Coleridge dropped his general considerations of critical terms, of the history of drama, mythology and poetry in general, and after a very brief introduction on imitation and dramatic illusion, he launched into a commentary on *The Tempest*. He went on in the later lectures of this course and the first three of his 1819 course to present accounts of the tragedies, including for the first time *King Lear*, and ending with *Troilus and Cressida*. He promised to devote each lecture to one play, 'scene by scene, for the purpose of illustrating the conduct of the plot, and the peculiar force, beauty and propriety, of the language, in the particular passages' (LL II 254), as well as the unity of the whole. For these lectures he took into the room a copy of the works of Shakespeare edited by Samuel Ayscough (1807), which had been dismantled and interleaved with blank paper on which Coleridge could write notes. So he spoke directly from the texts in front of him. There is no way of knowing how he developed at length many of his discussions, for the few brief newspaper reports give little help (except in the case of *Troilus and Cressida*), but the notes he made are continually interesting in their attentiveness to detail and

perceptive analysis of language in relation to character.

In his technique in these late lectures of developing an account of the organic unity of a play from the opening scenes by a commentary focused on the poetry Coleridge recognized at last what was new and exciting about his critical method. Some of his best remarks in his 1811-12 lectures already show his wonderful grasp of meaning in relation to the development of character, as in his discussion of *Richard II* in Lecture 12 of that series, where, for example, he zooms in on 3.3, the scene in which Bolingbroke discovers that the beleaguered Richard is holed up in Berkeley Castle and sends Northumberland to deliver a message to him:

Go to the rude ribs of that ancient castle
Through brazen trumpet send the breath of parley
Into his ruined ears, and thus deliver:
Henry Bolingbroke
On both his knees doth kiss King Richard's hand,
And sends allegiance and true faith of heart
To his most royal person...

In the Riverside edition of Shakespeare 'his ruined ears' is glossed 'its (the castle's) ruinous loopholes', while the Norton Shakespeare has 'its battered loopholes'. The modern editors of these well-known editions⁷ miss the point and should have read their Coleridge, who 'had no doubt that the reason Shakespeare used the personal pronoun 'his' was to show that although Bolingbroke was only speaking of the castle his thoughts dwelt on Richard the King' (LL I 384). Coleridge saw that 'his' applies both to the castle and to Richard, and reveals something important about Bolingbroke's character—that in spite of his protestations of loyalty he knows and means to exploit Richard's ruin.

In his 1818 lecture on this play Coleridge probed still more deeply, observing, for instance, how the rhymes that end Bolingbroke's accusations in the opening scene against Mowbray show he has planned his part in advance, and 'well express the *preconcertedness* of Bolingbrook's Scheme, so beautifully contrasted with the vehemence and sincere irritation of Mowbray' (LL II 284). Coleridge went on to consider other uses of rhyme in the play, in order to show how their mode of speech reveals aspects of the characters of Gaunt and Richard especially. Here he was driven to invent the term 'preconcertedness', just as elsewhere he pointed to 'feminine *friendism*' in Richard, 'mistaking the delight of being loved by him for a love for him' (LL II 287). Coleridge introduced new terms in other lectures in this series, for example in noticing how the word 'again' in Horatio's first question about the Ghost in *Hamlet*, 'What? Has this thing appeared again tonight?' has a 'credibilizing effect' (LL II

⁷ The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London, 1997).

295) in helping us to accept the arrival of the Ghost. Other coinages include ‘presentimental’ to illustrate how in retrospect little speeches may be seen to foreshadow what is to come, and ‘unpossessedness’ (not possessing any prior knowledge or anxiety) to illustrate the difference between Banquo’s open curiosity in meeting the Witches in *Macbeth* and Macbeth’s anxious state of mind: (‘Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/ Things that do sound so fair?’). Banquo’s mind, Coleridge says, is ‘wholly present to the present Object—an unsullied, un-scarified Mirror’, ‘unscarified’ being another coinage (LL I 306). His need to coin words indicates how original and incisive Coleridge’s practice here was, and a sympathetic reviewer in the *Courier* wrote: ‘He appears to us, to have studied our great Bard with an intensity of the reasoning faculties, and at the same time with a fervor and sensibility of poetical feeling which rarely unite in the same person. He has opened to himself an entirely new path’ (LL II 334).

This reviewer praises Coleridge as having none of the ‘glib nonsense’ of William Hazlitt, who had published his *Characters of Shakespeare* in 1817, and was lecturing at the Surrey Institution in 1818. He was unfair to Hazlitt, whose account of Shakespeare’s plays one by one is much more systematic than Coleridge’s, but also more old-fashioned, is judgmental, provides lots of long quotations to illustrate beauties and is much concerned with the ruling passion in principal characters. He is very good on power and politics in plays like *Coriolanus*, not one Coleridge deals with, but has little interest in Shakespeare’s poetic language. It is notable that the works that for Coleridge demonstrated Shakespeare’s poetic genius from the beginning of his career, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, Hazlitt dismissed as ‘a couple of ice-houses. They are about as hard, as glittering, and as cold. ... The whole is laboured, up-hill work’⁸. Hazlitt also had little time for *Love’s Labours Lost*, observing, ‘If we were to part with any of the author’s comedies, it should be this’ (*Works*, IV 332); Coleridge, by contrast, had begun his discussion of plays in his fifth lecture in 1811 by demonstrating ‘The wonderful activity of Thoughts throughout the whole first Scene’ of this play (LL I 265). Hazlitt liked to move towards generalities, and objected in his comments on *Coriolanus* to poetry as undemocratic: ‘Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right’, or in other words, chooses kings rather than common people for its subject.

Coleridge differed from Hazlitt in his critical practice as he came to understand that the best criticism needed to be concerned with particulars. There’s a fine moment in his notes for his lecture on *Macbeth* in 1819 when he remarked on the ‘easily satisfied mind’ of Banquo in interrogating the Witches, compared with Macbeth’s eagerness to find out more, and quotes from their dialogue:

⁸ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works*, edited P. P. Howe (21 vols., London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1930-34), IV.291.

B. The Earth hath bubbles—

Whither are they vanished?

M. Into the Air—and what seemed corporal melted

As Breath into the wind—WOULD THEY HAD STAY'D.

Is it too minute to notice the appropriateness of the Simile, 'As Breath' in a cold Climate? (LL.II.307)

Coleridge acutely notices how breath in a cold climate like Scotland's may become visible as vapour, so that the image is suggestive of location. Much earlier, in 1810, he had remarked in a notebook entry while reading Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, and thinking of *The Edinburgh Review*, 'I must not forget in speaking of the certain Hubbub, I am to undergo for hypercriticism, to point out how little instructive any criticism can be which does not enter into minutiae' (CN III 3971). This comment precedes in date the lectures of 1811-12, when he still had ambitious schemes to expound the principles common to the fine arts, and it was only in his late lectures that he learned to build his argument from the minutiae of practical criticism.

It seems to me that in turning to practical criticism Coleridge discovered at last what earlier remarks show he had known without recognizing their importance, that for his mode of criticism he needed to enter into minutiae. His earlier lectures often produced brilliant insights in relation to specific lines or images, but only in his late lectures did he abandon his concern with general principles and realise how he could best demonstrate the power and unity of design in Shakespeare's plays by dwelling in detail on their language and poetic imagery. Here may be seen an analogy with his early development as a poet. As he matured Coleridge had to shed his larger ambitions to write grand public poetry on general issues and principles—no easy task when his friend Lamb compared *Religious Musings* to *Paradise Lost*—and recognize the special and original quality of his conversation poems, beginning with *The Eolian Harp*, which confirm his stature and originality as a poet. In his courses of lectures on Shakespeare he learned to abandon his obsessions with defining his terminology and with establishing the principles of the fine arts in general, in favor of practical criticism, focusing on Shakespeare's language and textual minutiae as a means of illustrating the design and unity of his plays. The late lectures are especially important as confirming Coleridge's stature and originality as a critic.