# 'The Comforts of Family'

Felicity James

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I WANT TO START THIS TALK AT MIDNIGHT, in the depth of a Grasmere December, when Coleridge, staying at Dove Cottage, was reading Samuel Daniel to stave off nightmare. The notebook entry is almost illegible with crossings out, evoking the difficulty of this time, when Coleridge was tormented both by his illnesses and by his yearning for Sara Hutchinson:

> Read Daniel – 12 °"clock, *1803*. – [or was it after 12 °"clock, *1804*/ I blessed Sara at bed time – […….] blessed them - & then made Dorothy's bed in the bed, & with her help made my own –]
>
> (*CN* II 1793)

In the next few lines, written around January 1 1804, he returns to Daniel, copying out part of his masque *Hymen's Triumph*:

> Think you any length/ of Time Can ever have the power to make A Hart of Flesh not mourn, not grieve, not pine That knows, that feels that thinks as much as mine? – Daniel's Hymens Triumph
>
> (*CN* II 1795)

We have an inkling, too, of a project he has in view, which will again involve Daniel:

> In Consolations/some part quote the introd. Sonnet to Musophilus –
>
> (*CN* II 1796)

We then hear more about this idea for a book of 'Consolations and Comforts' in his letter to Thomas Poole a few days later, when, beset by his bodily pains, he outlines his plan for a work which will be entitled:

> Though wretchedly ill, I have not yet been deserted by hope—less dejected than in any former illness—and my mind has been active, and not vaguely, but to that determinate purpose which has employed me the last three months, and I want only one fortnight steady reading to have got all my materials before me, and then I neither stir to the right nor to the left, so help me God! till the work is finished. Consolations and Comforts from the exercise and right application of the Reason, the Imagination, and the Moral Feelings, addressed especially to those in Sickness, Adversity, or Distress of Mind, *from Speculative Gloom* etc.
>
> I put that last phrase, *though barbarous*, for your information. I have puzzled for hours together, and could never hit off a phrase to express that idea, that is, at once neat and terse, and yet good English. The whole Plan of my literary Life I have now layed down - & the exact order in which I shall execute it, if God vouchsafe me life and adequate health; and I have sober though confident expectations that I shall render a good account of what may have appeared to you and others, a distracting manifoldness in my objects and attainments. (*CL* II 1036).

On one level, we can see the ideas explored in this letter bearing fruit in *The*

*Friend* (1809-10), and, as suggested by the lines 'Plan of my literary Life', feeding into the *Biographia Literaria*. Yet on another level, long before 1804, he had been considering the nature of consolations and comforts. I want, in this talk, to move back from that reading of Daniel in the rainy, cold winter of 1803-4, to think about the ways in which the drive to console and comfort, and to seek consolation himself, might be evident through the later 1790s and early 1800s. I will start with the language of friendship and collaboration, and then move on to a discussion of the more difficult family relationships.

To begin with, let's look more closely at the sonnet he picks out for inclusion in 'Consolations', the introduction to *Musophilus*, Daniel's 1599 dialogue poem, a defence of learning, particularly poetic learning, a knotty, intellectual work. The sonnet which opens the poem dedicates the work to Daniel's friend and mentor, Fulke Greville.

Daniel presents Fulke Greville with verse which he says is purely his own, not in dialogue with the passions or factions of others but 'only modelled / In this poore Frame, the Form of mine own Heart'. This is a poem of intellectual self-reliance, looking inward:

> Where, to revive my self, my Muse is led
> With Motions of her own, t'act her own Part
> Striving to make her now contemned Art,
> As faire t'her self as possibly She can.[1]

It is a statement of individual art, and yet even as it makes its claim for individuality, it also shows off friendship and literary association, marking *Musophilus* as in dialogue with Fulke Greville's work.

The way in which Daniel, and in particular a Daniel sonnet to his mentor and friend, Fulke Greville, works his way into Coleridge's language of comfort and consolation is interesting. The volumes of Samuel Daniel had a particular role to play in Coleridge's own friendship. Coleridge had access to two sets of the 1718 works of Samuel Daniel, which he used at different times; in 1803/4 he was using the sets which belonged to Wordsworth; later, in 1808 to 1809, he had laid claim to Charles Lamb's volumes, which he extensively annotated. Lamb later recovered these, 'enriched with MSS notes, I wish every book I have were so noted. They have thoroughly converted me to relish Daniel, or to say I relish him, for, after all, I believe I did relish him'.[2] Epigraphs from Daniel would appear in *The Friend*; Daniel is mentioned in the *Biographia Literaria* several times, in connection with Wordsworth and with Lamb. Coleridge argues that 'Mr. Wordsworth strikingly resembles Samuel Daniel, one of the golden writers of our golden Elizabethan age, now most causelessly neglected'; later, he directs the reader to the extracts from Samuel Daniel in Lamb's *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived About the Time of*

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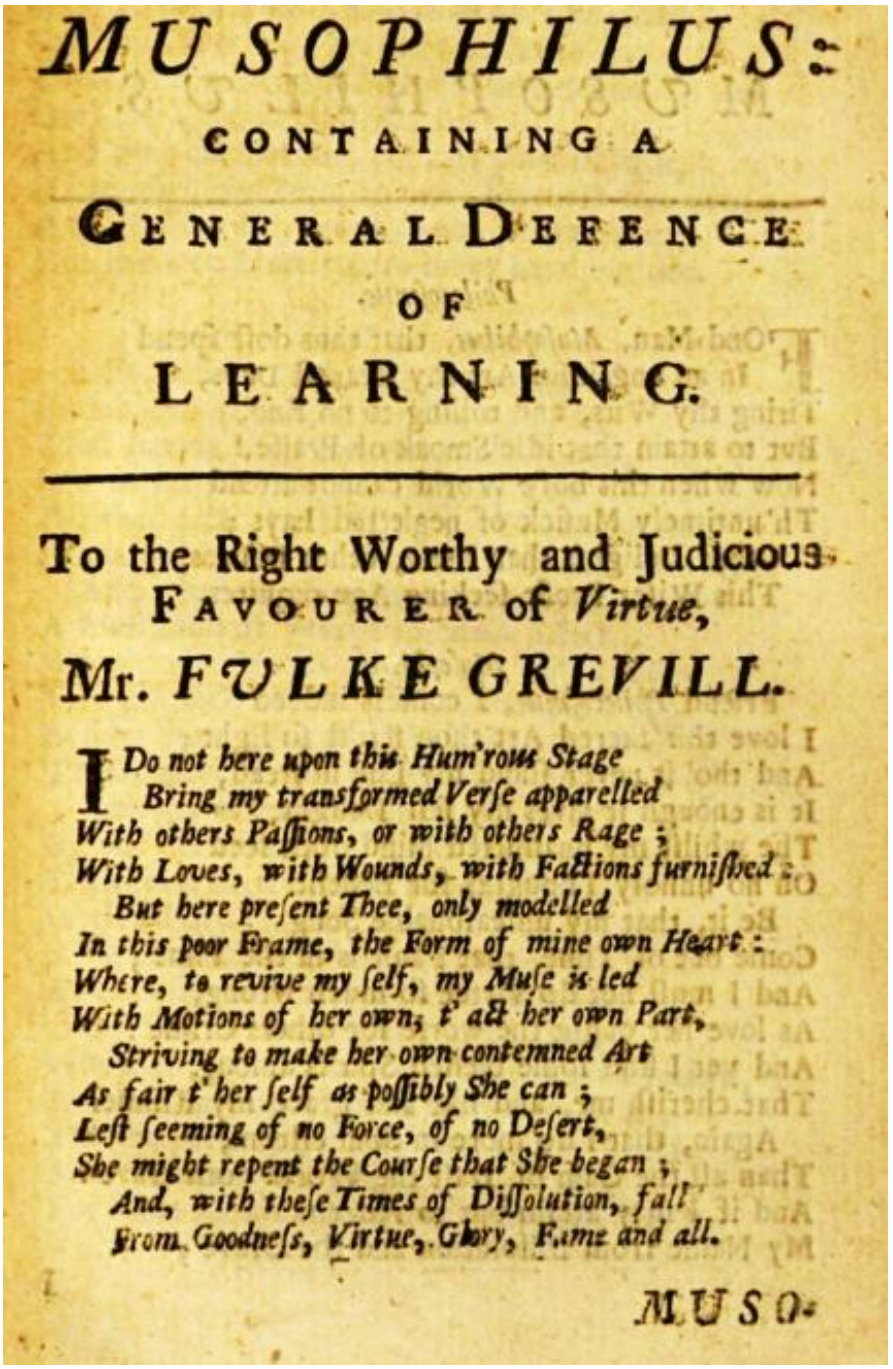
[1] *The Poetical Works of Mr. Samuel Daniel, Author of the English History: To which is Prefix'd, Memoirs of His Life and Writings*, 2 vols. (London: 1718), II: 367.

[2] June 7 1809, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. by Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975-8), III: 13 - hereafter, Marrs.

*Shakespeare.*[3]



MUSOPHILUS:

CONTAINING A

GENERAL DEFENCE

OF

LEARNING.

To the Right Worthy and Judicious
FAVOURER of *Virtue*,

Mr. *FULKE GREVILL.*

*I Do not here upon this Hum'rous Stage*
*Bring my transformed Verſe apparelled*
*With others Paſſions, or with others Rage;*
*With Loves, with Wounds, with Factions furniſhed:*
*But here preſent Thee, only modelled*
*In this poor Frame, the Form of mine own Heart:*
*Where, to revive my ſelf, my Muſe is led*
*With Motions of her own, t' act her own Part,*
*Striving to make her own contemned Art*
*As fair t' her ſelf as poſſibly She can;*
*Leſt ſeeming of no Force, of no Deſert,*
*She might repent the Courſe that She began;*
*And, with theſe Times of Diſſolution, fall*
*From Goodneſs, Virtue, Glory, Fame and all.*

MUSO-

[3] *Biographia Literaria,* ed. by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton University Press, 1983), 146. See also Stephen Gill, "'Meditative Morality': Wordsworth and Samuel Daniel," *Review of English Studies* 55 (2004): 565–582.

The poetry of Daniel, then, prompts thoughts of comfort and consolation not only through its content, but also in the ways in which the volumes are handed around friends, annotated, appreciated, and then used as touchstones in *Biographia Literaria*. So on the one hand a statement of individuality; on the other, a representation of friendship. Consolation must come from within, the muse acting her own part; but it also seems to come from that muse hearing an answering voice of literary friendship.

I've gone into detail about the reading of Daniel because it suggests that Coleridge's language of comfort and consolation is bound up with collaboration, formulated through his response to others, and their responses to him. I now want to turn to two moments where we see Coleridge first offering, and then seeking, comfort. The first consists of a letter and poem to Charles Lamb. We have touched on the ways in which Daniel's poems are a part of the friendship with Lamb, and Lamb is a very good case study for understanding how Coleridge could act as a comforter and consoler. It is to Coleridge that Lamb writes in the immediate aftermath of his mother's death at the hands of his sister, asking for as religious a letter as possible. Coleridge obliges:

> [September 28, 1796.]
>
> Your letter, my friend, struck me with a mighty horror. It rushed upon me and stupified my feelings. You bid me write you a religious letter; I am not a man who would attempt to insult the greatness of your anguish by any other consolation. Heaven knows that in the easiest fortunes there is much dissatisfaction and weariness of spirit; much that calls for the exercise of patience and resignation; but in storms, like these, that shake the dwelling and make the heart tremble, there is no middle way between despair and the yielding up of the whole spirit unto the guidance of faith. And surely it is a matter of joy, that your faith in Jesus has been preserved; the Comforter that should relieve you is not far from you. But as you are a Christian, in the name of that Saviour, who was filled with bitterness and made drunken with wormwood, I conjure you to have recourse in frequent prayer to 'his God and your God,' the God of mercies, and father of all comfort. Your poor father is, I hope, almost senseless of the calamity; the unconscious instrument of Divine Providence knows it not, and your mother is in heaven. It is sweet to be roused from a frightful dream by the song of birds, and the gladsome rays of the morning. Ah, how infinitely more sweet to be awakened from the blackness and amazement of a sudden horror, by the glories of God manifest, and the hallelujahs of angels.
>
> As to what regards yourself, I approve altogether of your abandoning what you justly call vanities. I look upon you as a man, called by sorrow and anguish and a strange desolation of hopes into quietness, and a soul set apart and made peculiar to God! We cannot arrive at any portion of heavenly bliss without in some measure imitating Christ; and they arrive at the largest inheritance who imitate the most difficult parts of his

> character, and bowed down and crushed under foot, cry in fulness of faith, 'Father, thy will be done.' (Marrs I 46)

The preacherly, consolatory rhythms of Coleridge's prose are a reminder of the time the friends had spent together consolidating their school acquaintance in the Essex Street chapel. Theirs, in the late 1790s, was a very specific branch of rational Dissent, informed just as much by their reading of authors of the past as by their response to the post-Revolutionary present. The language of ejected ministers such as Richard Baxter is present in Coleridge's language of consolation, particularly Baxter's injunction that an important 'part of our work is to comfort the disconsolate, and to settle the Peace of our people's souls'.[4] Reeve Parker, in *Coleridge's Meditative Art*, has written very well on how Baxter's interest in the 'set and solemn' art of meditation in *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* might have informed Coleridge's approach to consolation in this letter.[5] And it *was* an effective comfort to Lamb, who tells his friend 'your letter was an inestimable treasure to me' (Marrs I 47).[6]

The letter, as Parker beautifully explores, prefigures Coleridge's great meditative poem, 'This Lime Tree Bower my Prison'. This seeks to console both the discontented poet himself, and his friend, Charles Lamb. Both are isolated, suffering both physically and mentally

> Well – they are gone: and here must I remain,
> Lam'd by the scathe of fire, lonely & faint,
> This lime-tree bower my prison. (*CL* I 334)

Compare the language of the letter, describing Lamb as a soul set apart, crushed, bowed down. The poem has a very similar movement to the letter, passing from isolation to consolation. Lamb wins his way 'thro' evil & pain / And strange calamity,' out through the valley of despair to the Quantock hills, passing from the darkness into the light. The hallelujahs of angels in Coleridge's letter are replaced by the creaking of the Somerset crow—a sound no less joyful. So too is the poet's bower transformed, illuminated from within. From the solitary self-dramatizing moment which begins the poem, we move to imaginative involvement with the experience of another: a sympathetic impulse which rebounds on the poet himself, to allow him a renewed appreciation of his own surroundings. Those surroundings, too, speak of reciprocity and relationship: the play of sunshine and shadow, the intertwined foliage, all these weave themselves into the language of comfort and consolation around the friends.

We have, of course, always to bear in mind Lamb's later resentment of his portrayal as 'gentle-hearted', when he begins to bridle against the elder-brother sympathy of Coleridge and reposition himself as an equal (Marrs 217, 224). But

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[4] Richard Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus; The Reformed Pastor* (1656), 77.

[5] Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1975), 30.

[6] As Graham Davidson has pointed out to me, Lamb himself is also an excellent comforter and consoler in the aftermath of John Wordsworth's death, when the language of providence returns in the letters of the circle.

we might also be struck by what is elided in the poem, the domestic labour of Sara, caring for baby Hartley, hosting, cooking, toil which is registered only accidentally: 'The second day after Wordsworth came to me, dear Sara accidently emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot, which confined me during the whole time of C. Lamb's stay' (*CL* I 334). In this celebration of a familial bond with friends, family is absent, registered only through the pain it inflicts.

The impression grows stronger when we turn to 'Letter to — [Sara Hutchinson]', or 'Letter [to Asra]'. This poem may be read alongside 'This Lime Tree Bower': what happens when Coleridge needs comfort himself? Who will write *him* a consolatory letter? Perhaps we can read 'Letter [to Asra]' as, in part, a letter to himself, trying to find the same sort of comfort he had offered Lamb. Just as in 'This Lime-Tree Bower', we begin with an image of the lonely poet. But this time, unlike in the lime-tree bower, for all the poet's attentive looking at each detail of the natural world—the larch tree, the 'peculiar tint' of the yellow green sky, the clouds, the stars, and the crescent moon—he remains isolated. Here it is the throstle, not the poet, who sings joyfully from within the larch-tree, and although that tree—'which pushes out in tassels green / It's bundled leafits'—is scrutinized as carefully as the lime, its leaves are stubbornly resistant to poetic insight:

> —I see them all, so excellently fair!
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are. (*CPW* I:ii, 681)

The poet's failure to respond to the natural world is also a reflection of the lack of responsiveness in his unhappy marriage. There seems to be no way through this isolation, although he vainly looks to Sara Hutchinson as 'My Comforter! A Heart within my Heart!'.

This is a failure not only of creative vision, but of collaboration, and also of family life—real and adopted. Coleridge among the fruitful Wordsworths is a 'wither'd branch upon a blossoming Tree' (*PW* I ii 685); the poet's is a 'coarse domestic Life', tormented by

> habitual Ills
> That wear out Life, when two unequal Minds
> Meet in one House, & two discordant Wills– (*PW* I ii 688)

His children horribly compound this feeling, giving rise to that remarkable, 'discordant', double-edged stanza:

> My little Children are a Joy, a Love,
> A good Gift from above!
> But what is Bliss, that still calls up a Woe,
> And makes it doubly keen
> Compelling me to *feel*, as well as KNOW,
> What a blessed Lot mine might have been.
> Those little Angel Children (woe is me!)
> There have been hours, when feeling how they bind

> And pluck out the Wing-feathers of my Mind,
> Turning my Error to Necessity,
> I have half-wish'd, they never had been born!
> *That* seldom! But sad Thoughts they always bring,
> And like the Poet's Philomel, I sing
> My Love-song, with my breast against a Thorn. (*CPW* I:ii, 689)

This is intense and disturbing verse: not only is the poet unable to access the joy and buoyancy of his own childhood, he is unable to access the joy of, or in, his children. As he turns away from Hartleian beliefs, the child Hartley too, and his siblings, become associated with error. The nightingale whose song echoed through those beautiful poems of Hartley's infancy in the 1790s has been set against a thorn.

When we reach 'Dejection', of course, these lines have been cut—the family is still further absent. The ambiguous feelings of responsibility, constraint, and love are cut away. Setting the two poems alongside one another, this is one of the great unspoken, telling elisions. Why can he not find comfort and consolation in the joy and love of his children, this poet who yearns to be beloved? Perhaps because they mirror him too closely:

> Ey! have I said, when I have seen certain tempers & actions in Hartley, that is I in my future State / so I think oftentimes that my children are my Soul. (*CN* II 2332)

Coleridge's deep foreboding over Hartley—from the dissociative strangeness he feels when he first sees him as a baby, to the upbraiding letters he sends him in later childhood and his disappointment at the disaster of his fellowship—might be seen in light of his own self-doubt, and perhaps his inability to console and comfort himself. There's an excellent discussion of this by Anya Taylor, 'A Father's Tale', where she notes the ways in which Coleridge foretells and retells Hartley's fate, 'one of his most painful creations'.[7]

Yet in the writings of these children, we do perhaps have a sort of consolation, an answering voice. Let's close with the writings of Sara Coleridge, the child of the 'Dejection' year, born in December 1802. She is also the child of Romantic collaboration, brought up by her mother, aunt and uncle Southey at Greta Hall, she knew Wordsworth 'more intimately than I knew my Father'.[8] Yet despite not having lived with her father for more than a few weeks at a time, she would go on to become one of his first, and most important, editors: 'the most significant single individual', in the words of Alan Vardy, 'in the long history of constructing Coleridge'.[9] As Bradford Keyes Mudge puts it, she is

[7] Taylor, Anya. "'A Father's Tale': Coleridge Foretells the Life of Hartley." *Studies in Romanticism* 30, no. 1 (1991): 37–56. https://doi.org/10.2307/25600879. p. 56

[8] Peter Swaab, *The Regions of Sara Coleridge's Thought: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 96.

[9] Alan D. Vardy *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

his great 'unacknowledged collaborator'.[10] She should not be seen simply in the light of her father's achievements, of course, as Jeffrey Barbeau and Robin Schofield have wonderfully demonstrated, her own literary creativity, poetic experiments, scholarship and theological thought need to be recognized. But editing, as Barbeau argues, 'allowed Sara to develop a thoroughly Coleridgean frame of mind'.[11]

Sara's editing was sympathetic, involved, and demanding. The 1847 *Biographia* is a creative act, digressive, allusive, personal. It offers astute critical and biographical readings, half the page often taken up with her own notes, translations and commentary. Samuel Daniel is carefully sourced and annotated. On the subject of 'This Lime-Tree Bower', meanwhile, her comments are informed by her sympathy with all the participants, including her mother Sara, Southey, the Wordsworths, and the Lambs. She quotes the description of '*gentle-hearted* Charles!' and commemorates his friendship with her father, while also paying slightly uneasy tribute to the 'fraternal marriage' between Charles and Mary.[12] Mary was still alive, and the nature of the 'strange calamity' the siblings had lived through was not publicly known. Sara's knowledge of the mental troubles of both sister and brother is evident, however, in her focus on Lamb's 'meditative pity and tenderness', a tribute comparable to her father's blessing in the poem. Belatedly, she writes herself into the narrative of 'This Lime Tree Bower,' the family presence that was hitherto excluded.

I have focussed on one trivial moment of her editing there—but of course she brings an immense amount of learning to her comments, and very skilfully picks her way through accusations of plagiarism. It was a difficult task for her. She commented to Isabella Fenwick, as she worked on the proofs of *Biographia* in 1847, that 'the trouble I have taken with this book is *ridiculous* to think of – it is a filial *phenomenon*: nobody will thank me for it – except a few the *wrong way* – and no one will know or see a twentieth part of it'.[13] She frequently speaks of the 'trouble' and 'labour' of bringing his 'body' of work into coherent form: that nod to childbirth is significant. Sara as collaborator occupies an ambiguous part-child, part-parent role, at once heir to and protector of her father's legacy. The poet of 'Letter [to Asra]' had complained over the intellectual frustration entailed in responsibility for his children, who 'pluck out the Wing-feathers of my Mind': Sara seeks to restore and replenish his thoughts. It also interests me that not only does she honour his intellectual projects, she attempts to rehabilitate his domestic life, paying tribute in the notes, in her short memoir and her letters, to her mother—'an honest, simple, lively minded, affectionate

[10] Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, a Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 14.

[11] Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), x. See also Robin Schofield's excellent *The Vocation of Sara Coleridge: Authorship and Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

[12] *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Sara Coleridge, 2 vols. (London: Pickering, 1847), II: 333.

[13] Swaab, xix.

woman' – and to the other Fricker sisters.[14] The domesticity around the poems is brought into affectionate focus.

We opened by thinking about the Samuel Daniel poem as a good way into some of the ambiguities around Coleridge's consolations project. The sonnet at once celebrates intellectual self-reliance, looking inward at the 'forme of mine own heart'. Yet at the same time, it looks outward to seek the approval of a literary friend. Perhaps Sara Coleridge offers us a good example of some partial resolution to that ambiguity. She is an image of Coleridge, but at the same time a sympathetic other, the family member who can finally answer back, and who does so in consolatory tones.

[14] *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, ed. Edith Coleridge (1875), 307.