# *"Love in Fairy-land":* Literary Wives and Daughters

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*Coarse-minded thing! she can't endure Fairy-land, where the lovers are as fine as mists, and the ladies evanescent as rainbows.*[1]

NATURAL VIRTUES OF LIBERTY, JUSTICE, AND THE GIFT of intellect marked the rise of the intellectual wife in the late eighteenth century. Mary Godwin Shelley (1797-1851) and Sara Coleridge *fille* (1802-1852) embraced the former and shared the last in their struggles against orthodox restraints of female delicacy and intellectual suppression. Both of these young women grew up in literary households and were nurtured by the political and social ideologies of the Romantic writers. While daughters of the Romantic era whose literary parents exchanged ideas and visits on their writings with each other, these women never met nor engaged in sharing their development as writers. Nevertheless, their lives demonstrate parallel experiences. As young women they achieved public recognition as professional writers, each contributing to the legacies of their literary parents. Through their intellectual perspicacity, these women examined post-revolutionary social and political conditions with a tenderness and grace that grounded intellectual inquiry in virtues previously limited to domestic concerns. From their observations and experiences as the daughters of Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Fricker, they defined the feminine spirit of intellectuality in their writings to impress early Victorian culture with virtues of natural goodness.

William Godwin raised his daughter Mary from infancy along with his adopted daughter Fanny, Mary's half-sister. Their mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had died from puerperal fever several days after her birth. Unlike Mary Shelley who grew up without her mother, Sara Coleridge spent her childhood with the encouragement of a mother who educated Sara while living in her uncle Robert Southey's household. However, instead of experiencing the loss of her mother like Mary, Sara did suffer abandonment by her father. She was estranged from her father for most of her childhood while Samuel Taylor Coleridge battled an opium addiction. After her birth in 1802, her father spent less than two years with his family in Keswick until he left in 1812. For the next 11 years, neither Sara nor her mother saw Coleridge again until January 1823. However, despite death and desertion, these young women discovered their absent parent through literary remains from which they established their relationships. The powerful influences of the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft on Mary Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge on young Sara, created an intellectual foundation that distinguishes these young women in the literary culture of the nineteenth century.

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[1] In her letter to Aubrey De Vere, Esq. written on December 30, 1846, Sara Coleridge invokes Venus as her muse for the composition of "Phantasmion," a fairy tale about the fickle nature of love published in June 1837. Edith Coleridge, ed., *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge,* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, Franklin Square, 1874), p. 261.

Both Sara Coleridge and Mary Shelley aspired to a heavenly place where they could reunite with their mothers and husbands. Each dreamt of a fantasy life to find domestic happiness. As Emily Sunstein describes,

> Whenever the weather permitted, Mary walked in the afternoons to the gardens of the Temple, or those of Charterhouse School, or farther out to St. Pancras graveyard. She did not see herself as religious; religion was coming to mean superstition, empty ritual, … . But the quiet country graveyard was in effect church for her intertwined faith in the immortal human spirit, her communion with nature, romantic inspiration, and her fantasizing… . And here Mary was free to 'obey Fantasia', daydream, and imagine the shining future promised by her star: 'my dreams my darling sun bright dreams!' she wrote in her journal years after.[2]

Mary's dreams and aspirations, like Sara Coleridge's fairy-land, reveal the interconnectedness of their poetic imaginations with their domestic happiness. In Sara's letter to Aubrey De Vere on 30 December 1846, she reflects on the composition of her fantasy narrative "Phantasmion," published earlier in June 1837, that closely resembles Mary Shelley's fantasy. She writes, "Before writing 'Phantasmion', I thought that for the account of Fairy-land Nature I need invoke no other muse than Memory; my native vale, seen through a sunny mist of dreamery, would supply all the materials I should want, and all the inspiration; but for the love part, and the descriptions of personal beauty, I invoked Venus to aid me."[3]

For Mary Shelley as an adolescent girl, reading her mother's treatise on a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* strengthened her resolve to attain intellectual equality with men. Wollstonecraft attacked beliefs that repressed female independence of thought as she continued to rely on principles of natural virtue. In her essay *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the more important Duties of Life,* she writes, "There cannot be any thing more dangerous to a mind, not accustomed to think, than doubts delivered in a ridiculing way."[4] Wollstonecraft attacks those who ridicule the uneducated female warning of the damage to the naïve female mind. Wollstonecraft explains that young women might not commit vices because they fear the world's rebuke; however, since their thoughts are unrestrained by instructive principles, their behavior should follow their hearts: " 'For out of them are the issues of life'."[5] Citing a verse from Proverbs, Wollstonecraft reminds young women of the Scriptural soundness of natural virtue but, at the same time, emphasizes the importance of intellectual thinking to discern good behavior.

In a similar manner, these virtues can be seen in Sara Coleridge's advice on

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[2] Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1989*),* p. 50.

[3] Coleridge, E., ed., *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge,* p. 261.

[4] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters in The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft,* Vol. 4, Eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (New York: New York University Press, 1989), p. 42.

[5] Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education,* p. 42.

the correct care of children when she writes to her husband, Henry Nelson Coleridge in October 1835, on the need to displace severity with a higher aim of parental discipline.[6] Her sincere goal is the intelligent care of her children, a lesson she learned from her mother's devotion to her and her education in her father's absence. She says,

> … for the improvement of our children's moral nature I put my trust in no methods of discipline: these may answer well for a warring prince or general who has a particular external object to gain, and cares not for his instruments, except *as* instruments. I, too, have a particular object to gain—that our children should acquire a certain portion of book-learning; but my *whole* aim is their general welfare—as it must be that of every truly parental heart—the growth of their souls in goodness and holiness …
>
> Indeed, I do not strictly *put my faith* in any thing but the power of grace in the heart.[7]

Her depth of spiritual assurance in the presence and power of grace illustrates Sara's commitment to the moral instruction of the Scriptures, while she also encourages independent thinking. Her benevolent approach to child-raising turns her to an awareness of higher influences, as does her humble attitude in editing her father's writing.

In Bradford Keyes Mudge's biographical account of Sara, he takes notice of her humility as a literary writer. When she assumes her role as editor of her father's literary remains, she establishes her female authorship but within the boundaries of feminine propriety. Mudge writes,

> In other words, Sara Coleridge's humble tasks should be considered anything but humble; they were, at the time, complicated strategies by which an extremely intelligent woman uninterested in writing fiction and partial to theology and philosophy both exercised her mind and attempted to influence her contemporaries.[8]

Mudge's appreciative perspective on Sara Coleridge as mother, wife, and literary agent can be re-imagined for her mother, Sarah Fricker. To acknowledge these women as intellectual wives fulfills an important gap in literary scholarship that interweaves natural virtue with excellence. While her mother's unpublished literary musings along with her remaining letters pale in proportion to her daughter Sara's, Sarah Fricker has lacked recognition as an intellectual and literary figure in her own right while wrongly condemned by critics and friends as an ill-tempered and insensible wife. Her humorous attempts at a private language were shared with her brother-in-law Robert

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[6] Sara Coleridge *fille* will be identified as Sara Coleridge in this paper, noting the absence of the 'h' in her name to differentiate her from her mother, Sarah Fricker Coleridge, whose name preserves the 'h'.

[7] Coleridge, E., ed., *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge,* p. 117.

[8] Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. ix.

Southey with whom she lived at Greta Hall and were recorded in letters to her daughter Sara under the alias of Mrs. Codian.[9] Southey also recorded her linguistic expressions as poetic humor in his letters to Sarah's friend and admirer Grosvenor Bedford, remarking on her nonsense-rhyming and attention to etymology as imaginative and intelligent.[10]

Like her mother, Sara Coleridge was drawn to her father's poetic genius. Her conservative nature and weak constitution softened her spontaneity and creative spirit while she pursued her writing in poetry, letters, and essays. As Mudge explains,

> … her sense of female propriety forbade the forceful assertion of the Romantic 'genius' so quintessentially represented in her father, and neither a propitious political climate (as in the case of Wollstonecraft) nor financial need (as in the case of Shelley and Austen) forced Sara to violate cultural prohibitions.[11]

However, when De Quincey published his scathing criticism of her mother in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1834, along with his attack on Coleridge's reputation as a poet and philosopher, Sara retorted, preserving an accurate memory of both parents. In defense of her mother, she writes to her husband Henry,

> The impression which the account of my mother would leave is that she is a mean-minded unamiable woman with some respectable qualities and that my Father married her from opportunity rather than much attraction of hers. My mother's *respectability* it did not rest with him to establish….[12]

Henry and Sara Coleridge properly measured these unfavorable views of her mother and father and were determined to direct their literary efforts to finish the publication of Coleridge's writings.

Some of Sara Coleridge's accomplishments as a poet have recently reached fruition in a 2007 collection edited by Peter Swaab.[13] Her own poetic works took a backseat to the publication of her father's writing. Sara was content to keep her writing an intimate effort until others recognized her literary identity through her achievements as a poet many years after her death. However, she was not forgotten nor neglected as a writer by her brother Derwent. After she died of breast cancer in May 1852, her brother completed the publication of *Coleridge's Poetical Works,* an edition that he edited with his sister Sara. He

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[9] See Molly Lefebure's *The Bondage of Love* for a more detailed account of the life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge and her intellectual imagination. She writes, "She [Mrs. Coleridge] was of an ironical turn of mind: a dangerous thing to be at the best of times. By using a private language she was able to give vent in safety to her irony; to pass comments on men and manners; to express herself without inhibition." (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1986), p. 222.

[10] Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love*, p. 221-222.

[11] Mudge, *Sara Coleridge,* p. 13.

[12] Sara Coleridge to Henry Nelson Coleridge (September 1834) HRHRC at University of Texas, Austin.

[13] See Peter Swaab, ed., *Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 2007).

writes in the opening advertisement of the edition,

> This volume was prepared for the press by my lamented sister, Mrs. H. N. Coleridge, and will have an additional interest to many readers as the last monument of her highly-gifted mind. 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. The preface, and the greater part of the notes, are her composition:—the selection and arrangement have been determined almost exclusively by her critical judgment, or from records in her possession. A few slight corrections and unimportant additions are all that have been found necessary, the first and last sheets not having had the benefit of her own revision. [14]

Sara's literary life and her death were embedded within her identity as a wife and mother. She honored these female roles with her poetic genius as a product of an intellectually astute mother and a poetically intuitive father.

As the daughter of an unorthodox and radical thinker such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, like the daughter Sara Coleridge was, relied more on traditional values of patriarchal authority than her mother did. However, also like Sara Coleridge, Mary Shelley embraced a religious affinity that their mothers shared as well. In William Godwin's *Memoirs,* we read of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetic praise of his mother-in-law. In his Dedication to his wife in his poem *Revolt of Islam* (1817), Shelley writes about Mary Shelley's filial relationship to her mother and father:

> They say that thou were lovely from thy birth,
> Of glorious parents, thou aspiring child;
> I wonder not—for one then left this earth
> Whose life was like a setting planet mild,
> Which clothed thee in the radiance undefiled
> Of its departing glory; still her fame
> Shines on thee, through the tempests dark and wild
> Which shake these latter days; and thou canst claim
> The shelter, from thy Sire, of an immortal name.[15]

Her mother's life is described as a "setting planet mild / Which clothed thee in the radiance undefiled / Of its departing glory." Wollstonecraft gently endowed her daughter Mary with her faith in divine benevolence. In her daughter's words, Mary Shelley describes her mother as:

> One of those beings who appear … to gild humanity with a ray which no difference of opinion nor chance of circumstances can cloud. Her genius was undeniable … . Her sound understanding, her intrepidity, her sensibility and eager sympathy, stamped all her writings with force and

[14] Derwent and Sara Coleridge, eds., *Coleridge's Poetical Works* (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1852), Advertisement.

[15] William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft,* Ed. W. Clark Durant (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1969), p. xxxiv-xxxv.

> truth, and endowed them with a tender charm which enchants while it enlightens.[16]

Mary Shelley exalts her mother's genius and empowers her language with the "force and truth" of "sound understanding" to enchant and enlighten her readers. With a fixed foundation in religious and philosophical principles, Wollstonecraft changed the social outlook, in general, on the role of the wife, and in particular, on her daughter's role as a wife, through her powerful writings.

As a young adolescent Mary Shelley read her mother's social treatise on vindicating women's rights and as well in her novels, alongside her father's political treatise on justice. In her biography of Mary Shelley, Sunstein explains how at fifteen years old, Mary is educated through her mother's work. She writes, "Though Godwin doubtless worried about the effect, he could no longer prevent her from reading his *Memoirs* of her mother, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* her letters to Imlay, and her last novel, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria."*[17] Sunstein insists that Mary idolized her mother as a "rational intellectual and romantic heroine who had defied injustice, custom, and prudence."[18] It is no surprise that a few years later, she falls in love with the radical poet Shelley and they quickly made plans to elope hoping that Shelley's wife Harriet would grant him a legal separation. On her visit to St. Pancras's graveyard with Shelley, a ritual Mary performed that brought her closer to her mother, she embraced her destiny as his future wife.

In a journal she kept with her husband that was begun on the day of their elopement to Paris on 28 July 1814, Mary and Shelley exchange their daily habit of reading and walking together. Each day Mary's entries record the reading of her parents' writings with her husband. Absorbed in her mother's writings, Mary identifies with her mother's radical view on feminine virtue. Although contrary to her mother's dissenting views, Mary conforms to the role of a wife that reclaims the Victorian value of obedience while establishing her professionalism as a writer.

Her mother, well-known for her passion to elevate women to the social and intellectual status of men, unwaveringly attacked injustices in the marital relationship and marriage law. Other friends admired Wollstonecraft's genuine contributions to the reformation of virtue to raise men and women to an equal moral platform. In her treatise *Vindications* on the rights of men and women, she argues,

> But I still insist, that not only the virtue, but the *knowledge* of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavor to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the *same* means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being—one of

[16] Godwin, *Memoirs,* p. xxxv.
[17] Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, p. 53.
[18] Sunstein, *Mary Shelley,* p. 53.

Rousseau's wild chimeras.[19]

Through these powerful writings on the social importance of women, especially young wives, Mary Wollstonecraft inspired her daughter with the faith she placed in divine benevolence to guide human goodness. Her persistence in the reformation of moral virtues, those based on doctrinal beliefs and popular opinion, changed the concept of femininity from weakness to strength, from gentleness to courage as natural virtues.

Coleridge and Southey were among those men who "treated aspiring women seriously; they shared their texts and libraries with them; read, commented on, and edited their manuscripts; discussed and recommended specific books and publishers; and, singly or in clusters, pointed the way for women who desired to become public intellectuals."[20] The religious significance of their writing for both Coleridge and Wollstonecraft reveals a moral foundation on which their imaginations and genius build their literary and personal principles. In their daily lives, Wollstonecraft and Coleridge met only occasionally; however, Wollstonecraft's influence on Coleridge can be seen in their debate on the usefulness of religious principles on moral behavior and the passions. In her close analysis of Wollstonecraft's brand of feminism as a religious thinker, Barbara Taylor emphasizes Wollstonecraft's vision for the progress of society and women with its religious underpinnings. Taylor explains, "… unlike Rational Dissenters, Wollstonecraft regards 'eros' as 'the core of the religious experience' (p. 108), for 'amatory identification with God' enhances and indeed revolutionizes female subjectivity and its yearnings, whereas, in the present state of society, relations between the sexes seem doomed to failure and degradation."[21] Experiencing personal failure in their desire for a love relationship, both Wollstonecraft and Coleridge search for domestic happiness in their religious experience, and thereby revolutionize the feminine identity in society. Paradoxically, poetic genius resists domestic affection while domestic affection nurtures poetic genius. So, too, in the lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Coleridge and their literary daughters, Mary and Sara, it may be this paradox of the poetic imagination that inspires and elevates the female intellect above moral restraints and orthodox limitations on the role of the wife.

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[19] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, In a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects,* Eds. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scharf (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), p. 150.

[20] Gina Luria Walker, "Mary Hays (1759-1843): An Enlightened Quest," *Women, Gender and Enlightenment,* Eds. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 495.

[21] See Claudia L. Johnson's review of Barbara Taylor's *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 316 in *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies,* 2004.