An Unnoticed Motif in Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'

Richard S. Peterson

THE ATMOSPHERE OF CONFINEMENT in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" has its beginnings in "The Eolian Harp" (or "Effusion XXXV," the title of the first version),[1] Coleridge's honeymoon poem to Sara Fricker set at their cottage at Clevedon, Somersetshire and "composed August 20th, 1795," according to the poet's headnote to the first printed version of 1796.[2] There the idyllic scene of intimacy as the lovers rest outside their cottage with the "star of eve," or Venus, presiding (7) and doubled by another mention of the time as "eve" (21), gives way to a picture of the poet suddenly alone and pointedly removed to the hillside nearby, lying now at noon with "half-clos'd eyelids" as he meditates on "many idle flitting phantasies" (38, 32). He wonders

> What if all of animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all?
> ("Effusion XXXV," 36-40)[3]

This solitary meditation, made at a marked physical distance and time from his lover, gives way to an abrupt change of tone when Coleridge suddenly imagines his spouse's disapproval of these speculations, in a conclusion deplored by most modern commentators:

> But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
> Darts, O beloved Woman! Nor such thoughts
> Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
> And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
>
> Meek daughter in the family of Christ,
> Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd
> These shapings of the unregenerate mind… [4] (41-47)

---

1 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), p 85, the earliest text. Cf. *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), I, 1, pp. 316ff.

2 Ed. Mays, I, 1 (reading text, from 1828), pp. 232ff. See also *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1912, 1980), p. 100n.; Keach, pp. 85, 464; and *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 176-77.

3 Between these passages the 1817 version would insert a further effusion on "the one life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul, / A light in sound, a sound-like power in light, / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where… . " (26-29 [1828]; *Poetical Works*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, p. 101, Mays I, 1, p. 233, and Keach, p. 87.

Such guilty feelings about the effect of metaphysical speculation on his religious sense of duty are expressed on occasion in his letters. Thus he confesses to the Reverend Francis Wrangham on October 9, 1794 that "instead of being the Wizard, I am the bewitched. I have indeed incautiously drank too deeply from the bowl of the blameless Circe—that sweet intoxication, that makes the heart forget it's duties and it's cares."[5]

In the poem to Sara (whose views are hardly "meek"), Coleridge's wayward spirit is called back to obedience, I would suggest, like Milton's Eve in the garden, who violates the guiding principle of "Hee for God onely, she for God in him, / His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd / Absolute rule" (*Paradise Lost*, IV.299-301).[6]

In his Eve- like wanderings from an Adam-like spouse, the poet seems to have been influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft. She alludes to Milton's authoritarian principle with dismay in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1790)—a work, tellingly, that Coleridge commends in the third number of his *Watchman* at this time; she deplores, with emphatic italics, Eve's initial submission, "What thou bidst / *Unargued* I obey; so God ordains; / God is thy Law, thou *mine*: to know no more / Is Woman's *happiest* knowledge and her *praise*" (IV.635-38).[7] In "The Eolian Harp," Coleridge's seemingly unqualified disavowal of his independent speculations makes this the strangest of honeymoon poems. It does give one pause that the concluding lines delighted Charles and Mary Lamb,[8] but the signs of incompatibility cannot be explained away.

---

4 *Complete Poems*, ed. Keach, p. 86. M. H. Abrams says that "The concluding verse-pargraph strikes the modern reader as a timid and ineptly managed retreat to religious orthodoxy from the bold speculation of the middle of the poem" ("Coleridge's 'A Light in Sound': Science, Metascience, and Poetic Imagination," in *A Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* [New York: Norton, 1984], p. 159). Jeanie Wilson calls them "disappointing and false" (*Risking Enchantment: Coleridge's Symbolic World of Poetry* [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990]), p. 76; Max Schultz asserts that the conclusion "unconvincingly rejects the poet's speculations" (*The Poetic Voices of Coleridge* [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1964], p. 40; and Humphrey House says that Coleridge "brings back Sara as an extremely narrow and governessy orthodox Christian" (*Coleridge* [London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969], pp. 77-78). A similar dismay is provoked in the hearers of the poet's visionary speculation in "Kubla Khan": "all would cry, Beware, Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair! / Weave a circle round him thrice . . ." (49-51; Keach, p. 252).

5 *Unpublished Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols., ed. Earl Lesley Griggs (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1933), I, 25, 64. Coleridge is consoling Flower for an unspecified loss and he adds that "The young Lady, who in a fit of frenzy killed her own mother, was the Sister of my dearest Friend, and herself dear to me as an only sister. She is recovered, and is acquainted with what she has done, and is very calm." For Mary and Charles Lamb and this incident, see below.

6 *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 81; on Eve's independence of mind see Bk. 9 passim.

7 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Sherf (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1987), ch. 2, pp. 126-27. (The author might also have mentioned Eve's curious nature as evidence of the need for female education, and even Milton's injunction to read widely in the *Areopagitica*.) Coleridge himself wishes in the Watchman that wives should be "free and equal companions of their husbands," a la the feminist views of Wollstonecraft (see Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* [New York: Viking Penguin, 1990].

8 In a letter the following spring, Lamb writes that the concluding lines "made my sister & self smile, as conveying a pleasure picture of Mrs. C. checking your wild wanderings, which we were so fond of hearing you indulge when among us. It had endeared us more than anything to your good Lady; and your own self-reproof that follows delighted us" (*The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin J. Marrs, 3 vols. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975], I, 12).

Though the next two years are marked by poems of domestic tranquility,[9] in July of 1797 the note of instability returns in the picture of the poet confined to "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," having "met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of [the] stay" of "some long-expected friends," who are identified as Wordsworth, Dorothy, and Charles Lamb in the headnote to the version of the poem sent in a letter to Robert Southey.[10] In that letter Coleridge details his predicament as "Lamed by the scath of fire, Lonely and faint" (1); "dear dear Sara accidentally emptied a skillet of boiling milk on my foot."[11] As a result, Coleridge was unable to join his visiting friend on a circuit of the landscape. Significantly, although Sara was also present on the walk, according to the versions of the poem sent to Charles Lloyd and to Southey, she is conspicuously absent from other versions, including the published ones from 1800 on.[12] It was "as if," Richard Holmes remarks, "she had ceased to share in the experience."[13]

But the setting of the poet's predicament has been imperfectly understood. The lime trees in fact have a special meaning, a metaphorical resonance, in traditional love poetry. For they produce an entrapping, sticky white substance used to catch birds—a substance here mirrored ironically in the hot white milk of the poet's debilitating, entrapping accident. Thus Petrarch—a poet familiar to Coleridge, who wrote in October 1796 a brief outline of the historical development of the sonnet from the Italian poet's "cold glitter of metaphysical abstraction" to intimate examples of the English form[14]—refers to "the leaves of the Laurel where first you and I were enlimed" (invescato; Rime 14, to Apollo). In sonnet 40, he complains of "tenacious birdlime" (tenace visco); in 83, he declares that though love enlimes him, he will not fear even though his temples are whitened by age; in no. 139, love urges, but the poet is caught by the birdlime (visco) of fortune; and in 195, amid "enlimed branches" (invescati rami), he will not try to escape, though his hair is slowly changing to white.[15]

To be reminded of the love motif, furthermore, Coleridge had only to recall the comedies of Shakespeare, where Beatrice is "limed" by the report that Benedick loves her (*Much Ado About Nothing* 3.1.104), and where in *All's Well that Ends Well* (3.5.26), Mariana observes that maids seduced by wooers are

---

9 In "Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement," set (in March-April 1796) at their new cottage at Nether Stowey, Coleridge recalls the beauty of "our pretty Cot," "a blessed place" with its "inobtrusive song of HAPPINESS" (1, 17, 23); Mays, I. I, pp. 261-62; Keach, p. 92. See also the "Sonnet: To a Friend who asked, how I felt when the nurse first presented my infant to me," which concludes, "'Twas even thine, beloved Woman mild! / So for the Mother's sake the Child was dear, / And dearer was the Mother for the Child" (Mays, I, 1, p. 275, from first printed version, 1795; Keach, p. 122).

10 Keach, p. 492 (letter of c. 17 July 1797; *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71], I, 334-36). Mary Lamb was also present, according to Mays, I, 1, p. 349 and II, 1, p. 480.

11 Cited by Keach, p. 492, Mays, II, 1, p. 485 (from MS 1), and O'Neill and Mahoney, p. 180.

12 *Poetical Works,* ed. E. H. Coleridge (1912/1980), p. 181 (notes to lines 68 and 75 respectively).

13 Holmes, p. 153. Sara was also omitted from the published text of "Frost at Midnight" (1798).

14 *Complete Poetical Works,* ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), II, 1139 (cited by Holmes, p. 126 and n., p. 380).

15 *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 92-93, 105-07, 282-83, 340-41.

"limed with twigs that threaten them."[16] Coleridge was himself to use the metaphor a few years later to describe the confining pressures of his translations of Schiller: "… I have learnt that I have Industry and Perseverence—before the end of the year, if God grant me health, I shall have my wings wholly unbirdlim'd."[17] The irony of the motif in Coleridge's poem is that love, once an experience of domestic content somewhat disturbed by thoughts of incompatibility in "The Eolian Harp," has become a kind of domestic confinement, lessened only by the presence of his friends. (Terming the grove of lime-trees a "bower," an unexpected term with its overtones of a love nest, only increases the irony.) That the specific resemblance of the lime-trees' substance to the milk of his accident, like the accident itself, is left unexplained in the published version perhaps means that only alert editors and readers—a such friends as Southey, Lloyd, Cottle, Poole and others—will be privy to the fact and fully understand this remarkable and affecting poem.

As his friends make their circuit of the landscape, Coleridge begins to revive by the power of memory, imagining that they will see his favorite mysterious dank dell where the solitary ash tree reaches over the brook, "that branchless ash, / Unsunned and damp, / Whose few poor yellow leaves / Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still, / Fanned by the water-fall!" (13-16) And he begins to see his place of confinement as one of beauty:

> Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that hath sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
> Hung the transparent foliage; and I watched
> Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
> The shadow of the leaf and stem above
> Dappling its sunshine!… (45-51)

He further takes heart as he turns in conclusion to the wider landscape, imagining Lamb watching a delightfully "creeking" crow fly homewards over his head against the "mighty Orb" of the setting sun to its companiable wood, linking the poet and his friend in shared delight:

> When the last Rook
> Beat its straight path along the dusky air
> Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
> (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
> Had crossed the mighty orb's dilated glory,
> While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,

---

[16] *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. H. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), pp. 129, 285. The motif also conveys entrapment in the history plays, as in 2 *Henry VI*, Suffolk's speech to Queen Mary referring to the Lord Protector's wife: "Madam, myself have limed a bush for her, / And placed a quire of such enticing birds, / That she will light to listen to the lays" (I.3.91-93). Cf. 3 *Henry VI* 5.6.13 and 17.

[17] Letter of March 1800 to Josiah Wedgwood, in *Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), I, 587 (cited by Holmes, pp. 270-71, but not in connection with this poem).

> Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
> For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
> No Sound is dissonant which tells of Life. (68-76)

This conclusion provides implied consolation for Lamb's own domestic unhappiness in London—the troubles of his unstable sister Mary, who had stabbed her mother to death in a fit of insanity the previous year. Coleridge alludes to this situation earlier in the poem:

> My gentle-hearted Charles! . . . thou hast pined
> And hunger'd after Nature, many a year,
> In the great City pent, winning thy way
> With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
> And strange calamity! (28-32)[18]

Though the poet says that "sometimes / 'Tis well to be bereft of promised good, / That we may lift the Soul, and contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share" (65-68), his poem frees Lamb, and himself, to share joy in the contemplation of nature.[19] That Sara was denied a part in revised poetic representations of enjoyment suggests that she too was in a way limed by domestic confinement, when her spouse could find liberating companionship only in others.

[18] In fact Lamb was usually more than contented with his London surroundings, but good-humoredly overlooked Coleridge's view here (Holmes, p. 154).

[19] In the first published version of the poem (*Annual Anthology*, 1800), Coleridge "changed the emphasis of the poem by addressing it specifically" to Lamb (Mays, I, 1, p. 350