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The Vocation of Sara Coleridge: Authorship and Religion

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by Robin Schofield

FOR SOME, HAVING A FAMOUS LITERARY FATHER may cause great anxiety about their own literary work. While this may be the case for Derwent and Hartley Coleridge, who resist comparison with their father, Sara finds in her father's work the opportunity to move into the public sphere as a writer in her own right, according to Robin Schofield's *The Vocation of Sara Coleridge: Authorship and Religion*. Schofield argues that while Sara's early work has garnered more attention, Sara's later religious writings are her most significant compositions (21). In this genre, she is both innovative and subversive as her public authorship and domestic concerns coalesce (3). Sara Coleridge has been the topic of several recent biographies, including Bradford K. Mudge's *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter* (1989), Katie Waldegrave's *The Poets' Daughters: Dora Wordsworth and Sara Coleridge* (2013), and Jeffrey W. Barbeau's *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought* (2014). Yet, while some have taken up Sara's religious works, including Barbeau and Alan D. Vardy's discussion of her editorial labors in *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (2010), Schofield is the first to address the religious aspect of Sara's compositional methods. In setting the field for his claims, Schofield recognizes the significance of Dennis Low's argument for Sara as a writer worthy of study in Low's chapter on Sara in *The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets* (2006). Schofield notes that Low focuses on Sara's literary work up until 1837, the year Sara begins her religious writing endeavors (9). This later period is the focus of Schofield's study. While providing early context for Sara's development as a writer, including the translations she produced at the encouragement of her uncle, Robert Southey, Schofield aims to establish Sara as an innovative and unexpectedly subversive author of the Victorian period.

Schofield provides an extensive overview in his introduction of other scholars who have turned their focus to Sara and, in this way, firmly establishes the gap his work hopes to fill. His focus extends to Sara's rhetorical strategy of framing herself as a dutiful daughter and wife and her preference for an ethical, self-effacing style which leads to her dialogic compositions. He also nods his hat to scholars such as Anne Mellor and Lucy Newlyn who "have drawn attention to the subtle recuperative strategies employed by women writers of the Romantic period" (16), which he applies to his study, for the most part effectively. While Schofield insists on the significance of Sara's later religious writings, at times the context takes up more attention than the analysis of her works. Of course, for someone who is interacting with contemporary debates

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as Sara Coleridge does, it is helpful to situate her literary development within her background and within the societal debates that urge her toward a vocation of religious writing. Likewise, Schofield's presentation of the authors Sara responds to, such as John Henry Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey (both Tractarians), establishes not only Sara's deep understanding and appreciation of polemics, but also highlights the skill with which she refutes their arguments. She does this by pulling from her editorial study of STC's prose and her Kantian ideas.

The book consists of seven near-chronological chapters broken into subtitled sections. The early chapters present the influence of Sara's Romantic literary fathers (STC, Southey, and William Wordsworth), her joint editorship of STC's work with her husband Henry Nelson Coleridge, and the support she receives from Henry in the publication of her poetry (*Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children,* 1834) and an extended fairytale (*Phantasmion*, 1837). Although both of the latter works were written in the domestic sphere for her children, they introduce Sara into the public sphere as an author upon their publication. These works, along with her editorship of STC's prose (especially when she takes on sole editorship after Henry's death), lay the groundwork for her development as a religious author who cleverly exploits filial responsibility and domestic duty to maintain respectability while interacting in the male-dominated realm of religious debate. One example of Sara's clever use of filial duty comes when she states her rationale for including her revised and expanded version of "On Rationalism" (a critique of Tractarian theology) in the "Advertisement" for the fifth edition of *Aids to Reflection*: "It was the 'desire of the late Editor' that she should write the essay 'to accompany' her father's work" (73). Here Sara presents her authorship through the lens of filial duty and the memorialization of her husband and father.

According to Schofield, Sara's reasons for participation in the religious debates of the time, particularly in dialogue with Tractarian views of baptism and regeneration, are twofold. The first reason is tied to Sara's work as the editor and informal literary executor of her father's works and literary estate, which required her to defend STC from various attacks, such as James Ferrier's claims of her father's plagiarism ("The Plagiarisms of S.T. Coleridge," 1840). By defending her father's ideas and compositional method, and by rearticulating his ideas in the context of the 1840s, Sara aims to save and bolster her father's reputation (and thus, her own family's standing), thereby securing the Coleridge literary estate for her children. This point is especially important for her after she becomes a widow in 1843. The second reason is that Sara sees polemical "discussions" at the time as often corrupt and unethical. Instead of fully understanding and interacting with each other's arguments, Sara is disappointed with the polemicists who engage in what she views as shouting matches where one author attacks another personally rather than interacting with their ideas from a studied, self-effacing standpoint. This idea of authorship—where one must efface the self to fairly address their opponents' views and ethically argue one's own—grows from the influence of

John Keble, who believed that religious poetry should not call attention to itself or the author through clever effect. Sara adapts this to a code of conduct for polemical writing. It is also worth noting, as Schofield states, that Sara would not have been able to enter these religious debates without such a definition of authorship. Schofield argues that editing her father's works allowed her to enter the debate while maintaining Victorian respectability. By staging her contributions as filial duty, Sara maintains propriety while subverting traditional gender roles and critiquing a male-dominated field.

While Schofield includes much contextualization for Sara's work, he does not neglect an analysis of her writing. His chapters on "On Rationalism" and Sara's introduction to the 1847 edition of *Biographia Literaria*, especially, place her writings within a lively debate and shed light on the dialogic method she employs when critiquing other religious views. Although both Vardy and Schofield have back-to-back chapters centered on "On Rationalism" and her *Biographia Literaria* introduction, Vardy examines how Sara's editing and writing in defense of her father constructed his identity for readers, whereas Schofield highlights how these tasks influence Sara's development as a writer who adapts dialogic methods as a key component of her compositional style. Schofield's attention to method is where he breaks from Barbeau's analysis of Sara's later writings as well. In her introduction to *Biographia Literaria*, Schofield demonstrates how Sara acts as a mediator between different opinions and views to present a fair, ethical examination of the doctrines she critiques. For Sara, participating in religious debates requires an ethical approach through open exchange, something she sees missing from many of her male contemporaries' essays. This dialogic method is transformed into conversations between her characters in her later *Dialogues on Regeneration*.

The preceding chapters often look forward to the penultimate chapter's discussion of Sara's unfinished and unpublished *Dialogues on Regeneration*, written between 1850 and 1851. While a great deal is made of the significance of the *Dialogues*, a surprisingly small portion of the text focuses on this innovation of Sara's literary development and her vocation. This is due, in part, to Schofield's attention to the contextualization and analysis of Sara's earlier works and her literary and religious growth leading up to her undertaking of the massive, approximately 700-page project. While the wonderful passages Schofield pulls to analyze led me to wish for more discussion of the *Dialogues*, the aim of the book is to demonstrate Sara's growth as an innovative religious writer. This is exactly what he does. Through Schofield's presentation of the *Dialogues*, I am left to wonder what Sara would have been able to accomplish had she not died before their completion.

Upon reading Schofield's illuminating book on Sara's literary vocation as a religious author, it is simultaneously surprising and not that few scholars have taken up a study of Sara's religious writings. Even Derwent, Sara's own brother, turned a blind eye to Sara's innovative religious work when he neglected to publish her literary remains (which he had done for Hartley), removed "On Rationalism" from the seventh edition of *Aids to Reflection,* and

erased any mention of her as STC's editor in his edition of the marginalia (instead only mentioning her husband Henry) (242). Schofield has brought Sara's later religious writings to life as part of a lively Victorian religious debate that future scholars will find helpful as an introduction to Sara's later work. This carefully researched book lays the groundwork for future study of Sara's religious writings, especially her unpublished *Dialogues*.