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Coleridge and the Romantic Newspaper: The 'Morning Post' and the Road to 'Dejection'
(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
By Heidi Thomson

HEIDI THOMSON'S *COLERIDGE AND THE ROMANTIC NEWSPAPER: The 'Morning Post' and the Road to 'Dejection'* provides a well-researched look at the connection between Coleridge's life and work between 1799 and 1802.[1] Her focus on his poetic contributions to the *Morning Post*, in particular, allows her to assemble a set of texts rarely considered together and to read them in the light of Coleridge's biography, letters, and notebooks. Thomson's intervention is both biographical and contextual—biographical, in tracing the interconnection of Coleridge's personal and poetic jealousy of Wordsworth and his own frustrated love for Sara Hutchinson—and contextual in exploring how his newspaper poetry for the *Morning Post* informs his eventual poetic achievement of the 'Dejection' ode. Through her analysis she finds that "the tensions between Coleridge and the Wordsworth Circle, and between his own and Wordsworth's poetics, were articulated much earlier than is usually indicated" (9) and that "a clear-cut distinction between private matters and public expression does not really work" to explain Coleridge's work in the *Morning Post* (239).

Thomson's interest in the *Morning Post* poetry works to redress a tendency to neglect those poems in recent editions and analyses of Coleridge's (prose) journalism. She is especially interested in the function of publicizing the private that these poetic contributions serve. While Thomson's approach is not explicitly psychoanalytic, she returns frequently to the idea that Coleridge felt a need or compulsion to reveal these aspects of his private personal torment in the newspaper poetry—a mode of self-revelation she finds similar to his broadcasting of his marital woes via letters to far-flung friends and acquaintances (17). She characterizes newspaper publication as providing a "socially sanctioned" means through which Coleridge could publish this private information (21).

After her introductory chapter, Thomson follows a mostly chronological organization—beginning in chapter 2 with an investigation of the changes in Coleridge's relationship with Wordsworth during their trip to Germany of 1798/9. This chapter also provides an overview of Coleridge's journalistic work prior to this date and a reconstruction of his first trip to the Lake District (during which he met and fell in love with Sara Hutchinson). In her treatment of Coleridge's reaction to the death of his son Berkeley, Thomson lays out a convincing model for Coleridge's tendency to sublimate the personal into

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genres of public address, tracing how poems and letters to his wife produce a distance that protects him from emotional pain.

Chapter 3, which assembles a network of texts around Coleridge's 1799 poem "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," shows off Thomson's expansive knowledge of Coleridge's oeuvre and fine attunement to the evolution of his language. Wisely including the full text of this poem and its introduction, Thomson makes a persuasive case for its simultaneous exploration of Coleridge's erotic connection with Sara and his conceptualization of an authentic, responsive poetic encounter. Thomson compellingly links this nexus of feelings backwards and forwards in Coleridge's oeuvre, finding traces of its comment on poetic domesticity in the "Eolian Harp" and a version of its theory of responsive audiences in "To William Wordsworth." Furthermore, Thomson outlines how its revision as "Love" in the *Lyrical Ballads* exemplifies the two poets' differing attitudes towards sensuality.

Thomson's fourth chapter, centers on various texts that inform on Coleridge's engagement with biographical writing. Setting up as a foil Wordsworth's work on his mental self-portrait in the two-part *Prelude*, Thomson traces Coleridge's theories of mental development in his newspaper poetry and prose. Bringing the presentation of lactation as an eroticized poetic discovery in "Ode to Geogiana" together with reflection on stunted development in his "Portrait of Pitt," Thomson teases out the personal meditations buried in writing that scholars have typically read as political.

Chapter 5 moves forward to Coleridge's relocation to Greta Hall in Keswick and tracks how even his celebratory writings about the sublime beauty of the place subtly encode his dissatisfaction at his separation from Wordsworth and jealousy of his fellow poet's domestic felicity. Thomson's comparison of Wordsworth's *Poems on the Naming of Places* with Coleridge's attempts to describe and claim landscape is especially persuasive. The centerpiece of this chapter juxtaposes Coleridge's journalistic recounting of the "Maid of Buttermere" bigamy scandal with Wordsworth's own disentanglement from Annette Vallon—an account which both rings broadly true and offers an opportunity for further theorization: Coleridge's newspaper series reads here like a case of (failed?) sublimation, and a more robust conceptual language a welcome addition to this reading.

In her sixth chapter, Thomson considers Wordsworth's decision not to print "Christabel" with the new edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* and how Coleridge's collaboration with Mary Robinson at the *Morning Post* telegraphed his disappointment over this choice. Bookended by instances that explore Coleridge's attempts to extend his (and Wordsworth's) approval to Robinson through his work at the newspaper, the bulk of this chapter considers the connections between the *Morning Post* poem "The Mad Monk" and poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Otway—valuable material, but work that is difficult to fully integrate with the chapter's avowed focus on Robinson.

Mary Robinson serves as the starting point for Thomson's seventh chapter

as well; here, she continues to challenge the narrative that Robinson "related to Wordsworth and Coleridge as a duo" (163). Thomson tracks here how both Coleridge's own writing and his editorial interventions at the *Morning Post* encode subtle digs at his poetic partner. For instance, Thomson examines how Coleridge's titling of the poem "Alcaeus to Sappho" positions Wordsworth as imitative of Robinson—certainly not a position Wordsworth himself was fond of expressing. Thomson also reads Robinson's "Mrs Robinson to the Poet Coleridge" as an expression of poetic community and argues for her influence in his realization of his marital unhappiness.

Chapter 8 considers the spate of poems and epigrams published in the *Morning Post* between November 1801 and March 1802 and described dismissively by Coleridge as "merely the emptying out of my desk." Thomson reads these poems more seriously, considering them against the backdrop of Wordsworth disentanglement from Annette Vallon and marriage to Mary Hutchinson. This chapter is a good companion to chapter five, returning to the themes of jealousy and exposure explored there. Here, Coleridge's jingoistic opposition to France is read as a sign of personal feelings towards Wordsworth rather than a simple political position. Thomson focusses in particular on the ironies of the "specific timing of publication" of the series of poems and epigrams, mapping them onto events such as Wordsworth's marriage (206). It is in this question of ironic timing that it would have helped to see a fuller exploration of the degree of control Coleridge exerted over the timing of his publications in the newspaper. Such a move would have allowed Thomson to explain more fully the experience of these ironies. The current account prompts me to wonder if what Thomson is tracing is a private irony: that Coleridge experiences the pleasure of these unexpected juxtapositions as the work he has submitted appears in print. Conversely, I question if it matters to Thomson's interpretation that anyone other than the critic assemble and reconstruct the ironic timeline. (One feels, for instance, that Wordsworth—busy with his marriage and situated far from London—can only be a perceiver of this series of ironies in Coleridge's mind.)

In her final chapter, Thomson culminates with a contextualization of the "Dejection" ode in light of the body of analysis the book has laid out. She challenges a false opposition between the public and private that she detects in scholarship comparing "Dejection" with the "Verse Letter" that preceded it, claiming instead that "[p]ublic performance, for better or for worse, is shaped by private life to the point that these two spheres cannot be distinguished [. . .] and Coleridge's fluent rhetoric of attributing public significance to private events was ideally suited to this" (220). Stressing the variety of forms through which this public expression is diffused, Thomson knits together the field she has traversed in a valuable way. I'd even recommend potential readers begin with this chapter, as it stresses the connective threads that lie latent at certain moments in the middle of the book.

This book will be valuable to Coleridge scholars for the new network of texts that it assembles. Thomson's deep mastery of the poet's oeuvre has

allowed her to put into conversation a wide range of writing—from fragmentary comments in the Notebooks to the (potential) hackwork of translated German epigrams to an array of more- and less-familiar published poems—and to map with thoughtful attention the evolution of ideas between them. Thomson's precise biographical knowledge of the movements of various members of the Wordsworth Circle allows her to set up ironies and juxtapositions that will encourage further investigation. Because of Thomson's focus on the twinning of personal and poetic crises in Coleridge's life, she gives less attention to the nature of the Romantic newspaper itself. While brilliantly noting the synergy between his "flair for sounding utterly convincing at a particular moment" and the "contradictory impulse" within newspapers to "sound totally persuasive on an entirely provisional basis," Thomson primarily focuses on the consistent role that Coleridge's newspaper poetry plays as a means of exposure (33–34). Given Thomson's interest in Coleridge's sense of his own poetic identity, a deeper discussion of how it connects to or diverges from his public identity and use of his several *Morning Post* pseudonyms would have been of interest to scholars of Romantic print culture.