

Poetic Power and Practical Criticism: The Shakespearean Underpinnings of the *Biographia*

Charles W. Mahoney

AS COLERIDGE CLARIFIES IN THE OPENING paragraph of the *Biographia Literaria*, his overriding concern in what follows will be to offer the definitive ‘statement of my principles in Politics, Religion, and Philosophy, and the application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism’ (BL I 5). Why? In order to settle ‘the long continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction: and at the same time to define with the utmost impartiality the real *poetic* character of the poet, by whose writings this controversy was first kindled, and has been since fuelled and fanned’ (BL I 5). This appears at first glance to be recognizable terrain: the point of the *Biographia* is to define Wordsworth’s ‘*poetic* character’, at the same time resolving once-and-for-all the true nature of poetic diction, as first set forth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that tortured manifesto which Coleridge considered to be ‘half a child of my own Brain’ (CL II 830).¹ Stepping out of his alleged retirement as the minor poet, and coming forward as the indispensable critical arbiter, Coleridge will explain the genius of Wordsworth in the course of setting forth his own poetic principles. He may require thirteen chapters to establish his premises, but the principal rationale for the *Biographia* will be as an elucidation of his own critical views and Wordsworth’s poetic practice. Or so at least the *Biographia* has repeatedly been read, following the climactic position of Wordsworth in the opening paragraph, the initial engagement with the poet in chapter 4, then the sweep of the second volume, beginning with the turn to Wordsworth in chapter 14 and continuing through chapter 22.

I will argue here, however, that the seeming prominence of Wordsworth in the *Biographia* belies a slightly different critical project, one that is larger than Coleridge’s evaluation of Wordsworth and that fundamentally makes it possible. If Coleridge’s primary critical objective is in fact to set forth his own ‘principles’, and to apply them ‘to poetry and criticism’, these principles derive from his thinking about another poet: Shakespeare. If it weren’t for what Coleridge has to say about Shakespeare, he would not in fact be able to define and defend Wordsworth—or, more comprehensively, the poetic imagination and ‘the real *poetic* character of the poet’. Whereas the *Biographia* has traditionally been read as a defense and explication of Wordsworth, it was in fact Coleridge’s reflections on Shakespeare that first prompted him to articulate the ideal of poetic character that he then applied to Wordsworth. Put slightly differently, Coleridge’s lifelong engagement with Shakespeare (publicly distilled and circulated at this point in

¹ Coleridge proceeds in this letter to announce his intention to set forth his own ‘plain, & perspicuous, tho’ not superficial Canons of Criticism respecting Poetry’, as if in anticipation of the *Biographia* (CL II 830). See also Coleridge’s remark earlier that year to William Sotheby: ‘It is most certain, that that [Preface arose from] the heads of our mutual Conversations &c—& the [first passages were indeed partly taken from notes of mine]’ (CL II 811).

the lectures of 1808, 1811–12, 1812, 1812–13, and 1813) made the *Biographia* possible.²

While the *Biographia* represents decades of Coleridge's musings on (among other matters) the nature of the imagination, the ideal of poetic language, the origins of meter, the essential qualities of both poems and poets, as well as the uses of poetry, these positions are most systematically developed in the notes Coleridge drafted for his lectures beginning in 1808.³ Although not explicitly mentioned in the opening paragraph, Coleridge's lectures inform his positions there as well as his priorities. Take for example the seemingly innocuous formulation, 'the application of the rules, deduced from philosophical principles, to poetry and criticism'. Coleridge was concerned throughout his life with the derivation and establishment of 'first principles', whether regarding his philosophical, political, religious, or literary-critical tenets. He set forth his principles most publicly and systematically in his lectures, beginning with the 1808 series at the Royal Institution, which were overtly concerned with 'principles' of poetry rather than with individual poets or poems (and to which he later referred, in the *Biographia*, as 'lectures on the principles of criticism' [*BL* I 53]).⁴ As he wrote Humphry Davy when proposing the course, he considered the first priority of these lectures to be the delineation of 'principles', and that only after establishing 'the general & most philosophical Principles' could he proceed to 'Lectures on a more confined Plan—namely, the Principles of Poetry conveyed and illustrated in a series of Lectures', beginning with a consideration of 'the genius & writings of Shakespere' (*CL* III 29).

Coleridge's more pointed attention in this opening paragraph to 'the true nature of poetic diction' and 'the real *poetic* character' of Wordsworth also takes its bearings from these lectures. Although Wordsworth is the nominal focus here, Coleridge arrived at his mature opinions on, for example, poetic diction and poetic genius, through the course of delivering his lectures on Shakespeare. In Coleridge's critique of Wordsworth's poetic diction (initiated in chapter 17, when he takes up the question of the 'language of real life'), he draws heavily on the distinction between 'copy' and 'imitation' that is central to his reading of

² There is a superabundance of valuable criticism on Coleridge's engagement with Shakespeare, including but not confined to the lectures. In addition to the individual studies mentioned in the notes below, please also see Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, especially chapters 1 and 2 (Oxford, Clarendon, 1986), John Beer, 'Coleridge's Originality as a Critic of Shakespeare' (*Studies in the Literary Imagination* 19.2 [1986]: 51–69), James Engell, 'Coleridge, Johnson, and Shakespeare, A Critical Drama in Five Acts' (*Romanticism* 4.1 [1998]: 22–39), and Theodore Levinwand, 'Coleridge, Intellectualurition' (*Studies in Romanticism* 46.1 [2007]: 77–104), among many other noteworthy studies.

³ No full records remain for any of Coleridge's lectures, hence the importance of Coleridge's notes, as well as notices of the lectures in the press, personal correspondence of various auditors, and the shorthand accounts of numerous of the 1811–12 lectures assembled by John Payne Collier and J. Tomalin. For details regarding the difficulty of establishing the record of the lectures, see Foakes's Editorial Introduction (*LL* I xxxix–lxxxvi, esp. xlii–liii and lxxx–lxxxvi). See also James Engell's review of Foakes's edition (*Modern Philology* 87.3 [1990]: 313–16) and Jon Klancher, 'Transmission Failure', in *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, ed. David Perkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1991), 173–95.

⁴ As Foakes notes, Coleridge 'was always interested in . . . the establishment of critical principles and a critical vocabulary, and of standards of taste and judgement, and his courses often began with one or two general lectures on such matters' (*LL* I xxxix).

Shakespeare beginning in 1808.⁵ Even more prominently than the question of poetic diction, Coleridge's position on 'the real *poetic* character' of Wordsworth derives from the Shakespeare lectures,⁶ which provide nearly all the material for chapter 15 of the *Biographia*, on 'poetic power' as elucidated through a critical analysis of Shakespeare. In this pivotal yet almost invariably overlooked chapter, Coleridge's definitions of the poetic imagination—as well as of poems, poetry, and the genius and character of the poet—were made possible by his sustained consideration of Shakespeare, beginning in the 1790s.

I dwell at such length on the opening paragraph of the *Biographia* not only to substantiate my claim that so many of Coleridge's initial premises (which is to say his principles) derive from positions he developed in the lectures, but also to suggest that numerous critical moments in the *Biographia* (both thematically and structurally) rely on Coleridge's Shakespeare lectures. Although chapter 15 is rarely included in abridged editions of the *Biographia*, and although there is a distinct paucity of criticism that engages it, once one is attuned to the resonances of the Shakespeare lectures that percolate throughout the *Biographia*, it emerges as a critical point of consideration, highlighting its Shakespearean underpinnings. Chapter 15 alerts us to how deeply interconnected the *Biographia* and the lectures are: as James Engell has pointed out, the *Biographia* 'is rivalled only by the Shakespeare lectures as the central work of criticism by a writer who is also one of the greatest of literary critics' (*BL* I lxvii).

Re-evaluating the significance of this neglected chapter underscores the centrality of Coleridge's Shakespeare criticism not only for its most essential critical dicta, but also for his compositional method. As the lectures were delivered extemporaneously, as public performance, so the *Biographia* was dictated extemporaneously (to John Morgan), with Coleridge using his lecture notes as prompts and reminders. With the Shakespeare lectures in mind, the *Biographia* appears to be less a response to Wordsworth's 1815 Preface and more the culmination of his thinking about the imagination, poetic power, and the principles of poetry. In other words, it was in thinking about Shakespeare that Coleridge developed his signature positions on (for example) the imagination, the willing suspension of disbelief, poetic power, practical criticism, the distinction between a copy and an imitation, organic form, and the origins of meter. Chapter 15 clinches a number of Coleridge's most important points. It is here that he applies 'these principles' (those regarding the imagination as set forth most explicitly in both chapters 13 and 14) to the 'purposes of practical criticism', which he avows cannot be better done than in a consideration of Shakespeare (*BL* II 19). Shakespeare provides an indispensable counterweight for Coleridge's thinking about Wordsworth—not an antithesis, but a counterpoise by means of which Coleridge fulfills the claims about the imagination, poetry, and poetic genius that he makes but cannot always

⁵ According to Coleridge (beginning in 1808 but more systematically developed in the 1811–12 lectures), poetic language should not copy but imitate 'true nature': whereas a copy is limited by its aspiration to sameness (the accuracy of the likeness), an imitation acknowledges its difference from the original, entailing 'a combination of a certain degree of dissimilitude with a certain degree of similitude' (*L.L.* I 223–24; see also *BL* II 72).

⁶ Most explicitly lecture 4 of the 1808 series, as well as lectures 3 and 4 of the 1811–12 series.

substantiate in his consideration of Wordsworth. Shakespeare exemplifies what Coleridge wants to claim for the imagination (e.g., its ‘capability of reducing multitude into a unity of effect’, variations of which formulation appear throughout the notes for the 1808 and 1811–12 lectures),⁷ at the same time as he makes possible the first explication of the practical criticism that Coleridge will proceed to develop in the ensuing chapters on Wordsworth. In sum, ‘Shakespeare’ is the designation under which Coleridge formulates his most abiding principles regarding the poetic imagination, poetry more generally, and the genius of the poet.

Before considering chapter 15 in detail, it may be valuable first to provide both a brief overview of Coleridge’s lectures and lecturing habits through 1813, and some indication of the discrete yet telling ways in which Shakespeare and the lectures inform so many of the critical priorities of the *Biographia*. With this in place, it will be possible to focus on chapters 13 through 15 (the complicated transition from the obscure pronouncements on the imagination in chapter 13, to the occasion of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the ‘philosophic’ definitions of a poem and poetry in chapter 14, followed by the analysis of Shakespeare in chapter 15, en route to Wordsworth beginning in chapter 17), culminating in an explication of chapter 15 as the decisive formulation of Coleridge’s Shakespearean positions on the imagination and the real character of the poet. Shakespeare, the subject of the shortest chapter in the *Biographia*, provides us with an alternative way to think about the structure as well as the critical significance of the *Biographia*. I am not proposing that chapter 15 is the fulcrum of the entire undertaking but (more modestly) that a reconsideration of the work done by this chapter will allow us to reposition our approach to the *Biographia*: what if we were to think about the *Biographia* not so much as a response to (and rebuttal of) Wordsworth’s critical pronouncements in the 1815 *Preface*, or even as a prolonged engagement with German idealism, but as a culminating moment in his sustained dialogue with Shakespeare?

Coleridge the Lecturer

Beginning with his Royal Institution lectures of 1808 on the principles of poetry, and concluding with seven lectures on Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Spenser, Ariosto, and Cervantes at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in 1819, Coleridge delivered over one hundred lectures on literary topics. The lectures gained for Coleridge a remarkable degree of public exposure (belying his claim on the opening page of the *Biographia* that he had lived largely in ‘retirement’ from the literary world), as well as a certain degree of notoriety, due to his often dazzling, disorienting, extemporaneous performances of Shakespearean genius, in which

⁷ Coleridge’s thoughts on the imagination did not of course originate in his lectures on Shakespeare; important earlier formulations may be found for example in various letters from 1802, such as when he describes the imagination as ‘the *modifying*, and *co-adunating* Faculty’, language that he would later develop in the lectures (CL II 866).

he appeared to his auditors to embody the genius he sought to describe.⁸ When the *Biographia* appeared in 1817, Coleridge was better known as a lecturer (and a dramatist, due to the success of *Remorse* in 1813) than as a poet, and was justifiably proud of his lectures (as various references to them in the *Biographia* demonstrate). Lecturing after the publication of the *Biographia*, Coleridge cited and read from it on several occasions, typically chapter 15.⁹

Of the courses of lectures prior to the composition of the *Biographia*, there are detailed notes for the first four in the 1808 series: two on the principles of taste in relation to poetry as well as on the origin and development of the drama, and two on Shakespeare as a poet, with particular attention to *Venus and Adonis*. Coleridge reworked all this material for later lectures, and much of it took on its final formulation in the *Biographia*. For the 1811–12 lectures, in addition to the notes in Coleridge's hand, there are also valuable shorthand accounts (by John Payne Collier and J. Tomalin) of ten of these lectures, which initially reprised much of the material from the first four lectures of 1808 (culminating in Coleridge's 'Final Definition of a Poem & of Poetry' in lecture 4 [LL I 245], which was later revised and incorporated into chapter 14 of the *Biographia*), before then turning to detailed criticism of individual plays, most notably *Hamlet*. (During this series, apparently in December 1811 after lecture 8, Coleridge was presented with a set of A. W. Schlegel's lectures, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* [1809–11], which he acknowledged in lecture 9 and upon which he began to draw freely, not least for his distinction between mechanic and organic form.¹⁰) These two series of lectures, 1808 and 1811–12, are those for which the most detailed notes remain, and which bear most immediately on his thinking in the *Biographia*.¹¹

Regardless of the announced topic of the lectures, Coleridge thought of them as fundamentally lectures on Shakespeare. Whether the heading was the principles of poetry or the history of the drama, everything contributed to his thinking about Shakespeare. The surviving materials show Coleridge to be thinking and talking repeatedly about the principles of poetry, the signs of poetic power, the 'perspicuous' definition of critical terms,¹² the organic form of

⁸ Henry Crabb Robinson's remark after a May 1808 lecture, that 'Coleridge's digressions are not the worst parts of his lectures, or rather he is always digressing' (cited LL I 114), is representative, and reflects the degree to which many of his auditors were simultaneously intrigued and put off by the degree to which he 'Intervolve[d] Himself into the Texture of his Lecture' (letter of Edward Jerningham, cited LL I 143). On Coleridge's lecturing practices at this time, see Peter Manning, 'Manufacturing the Romantic Image: Hazlitt and Coleridge Lecturing', in *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780–1840*, ed. James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), William Christie, 'Res Theatralis Histrionica: Acting Coleridge in the Lecture Theater', *Studies in Romanticism* 52.4 (2013), 485–509, and Sarah Zimmerman, *The Romantic Literary Lecture in Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 30–59.

⁹ See Coleridge's notes for lectures 3 and 4 of the 1818 series on European literature, where he directs himself to 'quote from the Literary Life' (LL II 95, 115).

¹⁰ For an overview of the complicated topic of Coleridge's use of Schlegel's lectures, see Foakes's comments (LL I liii–lxiv and 172–75).

¹¹ Of the subsequent courses of lectures before 1815, there are incomplete notes for the 1812 lectures on European drama as well as for the 1813 series in Bristol on Shakespeare and education, but no materials pertaining to the 1812 series on Shakespeare, the 1812–13 lectures on belles lettres at the Surrey Institution, or the 1813 lectures on Milton and poetry.

¹² As Coleridge observed in the syllabus for a course of lectures in 1812, 'to use each word in a sense peculiarly its own, is an indispensable condition of all just thinking' (LL I 480).

Shakespeare's plays, the nature of dramatic illusion, and the operations of the poetic imagination. Coleridge's goal was never to cover the entirety of Shakespeare's œuvre over the course of all his lectures (he ignored many of the plays, while returning almost obsessively to others, such as *Hamlet*), but to use the lectures as opportunities for thinking repeatedly about his central critical priorities. This appearance of repetition did not please everyone in attendance. One regular auditor, Henry Crabb Robinson, complained after lecture 4 of the 1811–12 series that Coleridge's

. . . habit of thus chewing the cud of his past lectures will be offensive. Hearers require to have the sense of getting on. And I begin to fear that Coleridge's laziness will lead him to be content with dreaming on and playing over certain favourite ideas which he delights in, but which some of his hearers will be tired of.¹³

Yet, as Foakes remarks, Coleridge's habit of 'chewing the cud of his past lectures' was integral to his efforts to refine his definitions of poetry (*LL* II 237). He was not being lazy but developing his critical principles through recursive engagement with the Shakespearean language so important to him, which eventually led to his best-known formulations in chapter 14 of the *Biographia*. Again, if it had not been for the lectures, Coleridge could not have defined poets, poetry, and the imagination as he eventually did in the *Biographia*, in the signature formulations that continue to be cited.

The Biographia as the Vindication of the Lectures

The importance of the lectures for Coleridge is everywhere evident in the *Biographia*. As early as chapter 2, as part of his consideration of the supposed irritability of men of genius, Coleridge summons the 1808 lectures in defense of the originality of his analysis of Shakespeare.¹⁴ This is a crucial, and sensitive, point for Coleridge, who persistently worried that his precedence and 'originality' as a critic of Shakespeare was not recognized (not least due to his failure to publish any of his lectures). The *Biographia* offered a public opportunity to rewrite this private grievance. Asserting that 'Shakspeare's evenness and sweetness of temper were almost proverbial in his own age', he proceeds to argue that this 'did not arise from ignorance of his own comparative greatness', and chastises Pope for quipping that 'our great bard "grew immortal in his own despatch"' (*BL*

¹³ Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, 3 vols., ed. Edith J. Morley (London: J. M. Dent, 1938), I 52–53 (cited *LL* I 236–37). Crabb Robinson proceeds to dismiss the fifth lecture as 'an amusing declamation against reviewers' (another anticipation of the *Biographia*?) but with 'scarcely one observation on Shakespeare', only then to characterize the seventh lecture (with the remarks on the imagination apropos *Romeo and Juliet*) as his 'incomparably best lecture', in which Coleridge was 'intelligible though profound, and . . . methodical' (I 53, 54).

¹⁴ It is also in chapter 2 that Coleridge cites the sonnets for the first time in the *Biographia*. The sonnets receive next to no attention from Coleridge in the lectures (see his brief note on them for lecture 4 of the 1808 series, *LL* I 80). Here he quotes sonnets 81 and 86 as evidence of Shakespeare's 'confidence of his own equality with those whom he deem'd most worthy of his praise' (*BL* I 35), while later in chapter 15 he quotes sonnets 97 and 108 as evidence of the power of Shakespeare's imagery in relation to 'a predominant passion', with the attendant effect of 'reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant' (*BL* II 23).

I 33, 34–5).¹⁵ What is at stake here is the origin of the claim that Shakespeare's judgement was superior to his genius—or, put otherwise, Shakespeare's consciousness of his own artistic judgement. As soon as Coleridge mentions Pope, he introduces a long note in which he briefly explains Pope's misconception as 'the common error of his age' before then entering into a lengthy explanation of his own correction of this representative mistake in his 1808 lectures:

Judging under this impression, I did not hesitate to declare my full conviction, that the consummate judgement of Shakspeare, not only in the general construction, but in all the *detail*, of his dramas impressed me with greater wonder, than even the might of his genius, or the depth of his philosophy. The substance of these lectures I hope soon to publish; and it is but a debt of justice to myself and to my friends to notice, that the first course of lectures, which differed from the following only, by occasionally varying the illustrations of the same thoughts, was addressed to very numerous, and I need not add, respectable audiences at the royal institution, before Mr. Schlegel gave his lectures on the same subjects at Vienna. (BL I 34*)

In short, Coleridge is at great pains here (and elsewhere) to clarify that it was he, not Schlegel, who first argued that Shakespeare was not a wild, irregular child of nature who just happened to be a poetic genius, but a self-conscious artist with 'consummate judgement'. Unfortunately for Coleridge, Schlegel's position was available to the public (his *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* had been published in German between 1809 and 1811, then translated into English in 1815 by John Black as *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*),¹⁶ whereas Coleridge only had his own notebooks, and the memories of his auditors, to cite in his defense. Coleridge's failure to publish any materials from his lectures meant that the English reading public considered Schlegel (rather than Coleridge) to be the greatest Shakespearean authority of the day. (Again, the *Biographia* offered a public opportunity to rewrite this private grievance.) Despite all the time and energy he put into thinking—and talking, and writing—about Shakespeare, the only relevant writings that were available to the public during his lifetime were chapter 15 of the *Biographia* (not mentioned in any of the contemporary reviews in 1817) and the fourth of the 1818 'Essays on the Principles of Method', which appeared in *The Friend* (I 448–57).

Coleridge is remarkably clear about his position in the notes for the fourth lecture of the 1808 series. He states directly that whereas it was previously 'a happy medium & refuge, to talk of Shakespere as a sort of Beautiful Lusus Naturæ, a delightful Monster—wild indeed, without taste or Judgment', the truth

¹⁵ Pope, *Imitations of Horace*: Shakespeare 'For gain, not glory, wing'd his roving flight, / And grew Immortal in his own despight' (cited BL I 35n1).

¹⁶ See Hazlitt's long and glowing review in the February 1816 issue of *The Edinburgh Review*; *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1930–34), XVI 57–99.

is that 'Shakespere appears—from his poems alone, apart from his great works—to have possessed all the conditions of a true Poet—& by this proof to do away, as far as may [be] in my power—the popular notion, that he was a great Dramatist by a sort of Instinct, immortal in his own Despite' (*LL* I 79, 78).¹⁷ He makes a similar point in the third and fifth lectures of the 1811–12 series (*LL* I 224, 275), and again, as he rounds to his outspoken climax in chapter 15 of the *Biographia*, dismissing once and for all the idea that Shakespeare was a 'mere child of nature; [an] automaton of genius; [or a] passive vehicle of inspiration' (*BL* II 26–27). All of the symptoms of 'poetic power' that Coleridge adduces in this chapter offer a sustained demonstration of his claim, dating to 1808, that Shakespeare's judgement was greater than his genius.

One might argue that integral to Coleridge's motivation for writing the *Biographia* was his need to vindicate himself under this heading, one that he felt was essential to his credibility and his achievement as a critic. Wordsworth had slighted him in the 1815 Preface when (despite his attendance at the 1808 lecture in question) he baldly remarked that

The Germans only, of foreign nations, are approaching towards a knowledge and feeling of what [Shakespeare] is. In some respects they have acquired a superiority over the fellow-countrymen of the Poet: for among us it is a current, I might say, an established opinion, that Shakspeare is justly praised when he is pronounced to be a 'wild irregular genius, in whom great faults are compensated by great beauties.' How long it may be before this misconception passes away . . . ?¹⁸

How long indeed . . . ? Coleridge had of course made precisely these points as early as 1808 (and in remarkably similar language, attending to 'a unity of their own' and the organic ways in which all the details 'contribute to one great end'), but he had not published them. Hence the need to vindicate himself so early in the *Biographia*, as if to set the stage for the numerous ways in which his criticism of Shakespeare would provide the scaffolding for so many of his other seminal points.¹⁹

¹⁷ In her 1847 edition of the *Biographia*, Sara Coleridge cites the same notebook entry in support of Coleridge's point here (at that time available in the *Literary Remains*; 4 vols., William Pickering, 1836–39), and proceeds to quote a remark collected in the 1835 *Table Talk* regarding Shakespeare's narrative poems and sonnets being 'characterised by boundless fertility, and labored condensation of thought, with perfection of sweetness in rhythm and metre. These are the essentials in the budding of a great poet'. Sweetness of versification is of course the first symptom of poetic power that Coleridge stipulates in chapter 15 (*BL* II 20) (Sara Coleridge, ed., *Biographia Literaria*, 3 vols. [London: William Pickering, 1847], I 32n, 33n–34).

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols., ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford, 1974), III 69.

¹⁹ See also Coleridge's detailed marginal note, dated 7 January 1819, in which he reiterates his precedence in making his claims regarding Shakespeare's judgment before Schlegel lectured (and before he read Schlegel), noting bitterly that 'as Mr Wordsworth knows, tho' from motives which I do not know or impulses which I cannot know, he has thought proper to assert that Schlegel and the German Critics first taught Englishmen to admire their own great Countryman intelligently' (*LL* II 293). Wordsworth was not alone in slighting—rather, simply ignoring—Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare. In his review of Black's 1815 translation of Schlegel's lectures for the *Edinburgh Review* in 1816, William Hazlitt pointedly observed that '[Schlegel's] account of Shakespear is admirably characteristic, and must be highly gratifying to the English reader. It is indeed by far the best account which has been given of the plays of that great genius by any writer, either among ourselves, or abroad'. (*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, XVI 58–59.)

The Shakespeare lectures percolate throughout the first volume of the *Biographia*, providing it with discrete points of reference as well as prevailing concerns. When Coleridge denounces anonymous reviewers as ‘fit instruments of literary detraction, and moral slander’, notable only for their ‘arbitrary dictation and petulant sneers’ (*BL* I 42, 62), he is revisiting an important theme first developed in an 1811 lecture on ‘False Criticism’ (and which culminates in the *Biographia* in his numerous intemperate remarks regarding Francis Jeffrey).²⁰ For Coleridge (as recorded by Collier and Tomalin), ‘reviews were pernicious because the writers decided without any reference to fixed principles, because they were filled with personalities and above all because they taught people rather to judge than to read’ (*LL* I 189). Similar to Roman tasters, reviewers ‘tell you what was fit to be eaten, & like the *Prægustatores*, the Reviewers gave their opinions but carefully concealed all the reasons for such judgements’ (*LL* I 273). Once again, critical principles are at stake (‘fixed canons of criticism’, *BL* I 62), Coleridge’s first priority ever since the 1808 lectures. The importance of the lectures for Coleridge’s sense of his public reputation, and critical contribution, comes to the fore again in chapter 3 (concerned with ‘*the author’s obligations to critics*’ and the ‘*Principles of modern criticism*’), when he reminds readers that his ‘entire publicity’ comes from his essays for the *Morning Post* and his ‘course of lectures on the *principles of criticism* as applied to Shakespeare and Milton’ (*BL* I 53).

Still concerned with his public reputation in chapter 10, he defends himself (in a remarkable passage) against the charge of ‘having dreamt away [his] life to no purpose’:

Would that the criterion of a scholar’s utility were the number and moral value of the truths, which he has been the means of throwing into the general circulation; or the number and value of the minds, whom by his conversation or letters, he has excited into activity, and supplied with the germs of their after-growth! . . . I should dare appeal to the numerous and respectable audiences, which at different times and in different places honored my lecture-rooms with their attendance, whether the point of view from which the subjects treated of were surveyed, whether the grounds of my reasoning were such, as they had heard or read elsewhere, or have since found in previous publications. (*BL* I 220–21)

Coleridge is concerned here with his reputation as a critic of Shakespeare, which he built not through publishing but through lecturing. Hence his need to demonstrate, at some length, that books are not ‘the only channel through which the stream of intellectual usefulness can flow’ (*BL* I 220), and that he effected important changes in critical discourse through altogether different media—namely his conversation and his lectures (many of the principles and insights of which he is trying to consolidate in finally publishing them here). As was the case

²⁰ See for example Coleridge’s long, strange footnote in chapter 3 (*BL* I 50*–52; later suppressed by Sara Coleridge in 1847) as well as a variety of other discrete jabs (e.g., *BL* I 71, II 242).

in his efforts to vindicate himself from accusations of having plagiarized Schlegel, so here Coleridge is attempting to validate the originality of his lectures (in addition to their utility). What he terms the ‘after-growth’ of his auditors, he later characterizes in terms of his goal, as a lecturer: to ‘leave a *sting* behind—*i.e.* a disposition to study the subject anew, under the light of a new principle’ (CL IV 924).²¹ It derives from his established practice as a public lecturer and determines as well many of his hopes for the *Biographia*.

Distilling the Lectures into Critical Dicta

Chapters 13 (on the imagination), 14 (the occasion of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and ‘philosophic’ definitions of a poem as well as poetry), and 15 (poetic power explained via Shakespeare) mark the stretch of the *Biographia* most indebted to the lectures. It is here that Coleridge offers what have come to be regarded as some of his most lasting contributions to poetics, on the workings of the imagination, the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (or poetic faith), the definitions of poetry and poetic genius, and the principles of practical criticism. As suggested at the outset, the often-overlooked chapter 15 provides an important moment of reckoning for the entire *Biographia*, not least because it is here—not chapter 13—that Coleridge completes both his consideration of the imagination (to the degree that he may be said to have done so at all), and his delineation of the criteria for the practical criticism that will predominate throughout much of volume two.

Coleridge’s thinking on the imagination is indebted to numerous English and German critics, and has seemingly innumerable antecedents in his own writing, including important formulations in his notes for the 1808 and 1811–12 lectures, as well as shorthand and newspaper accounts of the latter.²² His clinching definition of the secondary imagination—as that power which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify’ (BL I 304)—represents the distillation of years of reading and thinking, much of it apropos Shakespeare. As early as Coleridge’s notes for the third lecture in the 1808 series, he is defining the imagination as the ‘power of modifying one image or feeling by the precedent or following ones . . . that of combining many circumstances into one moment of thought to produce that ultimate end of human Thought, and human Feeling, Unity’ (LL I 68). In his notes for the fourth lecture of 1808, he offers a strikingly similar formulation, remarking of Shakespeare that ‘we find undoubted proof in his mind of Imagination or the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, & by a sort

²¹ This long letter (to J. Britton, 28 February 1819) provides remarkable insight into Coleridge’s preparation for and performance of his lectures, as well as a defense of his by-then notorious extemporaneity.

²² See BL I 304 n4, as well as BL I lxxxv–xciii. See also Coleridge’s extended citation (in chapter 12) from an entry of his for Southey’s *Omniana* regarding ‘the imagination, or shaping and modifying power’ (BL I 293).

of *fusion to force many into one* (LL I 81).²³ Common to all three of these formulations is the imperative that the imagination modify (i.e., dissolve and dissipate) in order to re-create, and in re-creating to achieve a sense of unity, as the imagination 'by a sort of *fusion*' transforms multitude, or Coleridgean 'multēity', into unity. There are any number of similar formulations in the 1811–12 lectures, such as the important definition in lecture 4 of the imagination as 'that capability of reducing a multitude into unity of effect, or by strong passion to modify [a] series of thoughts into one predominant thought or feeling' (LL I 249). The larger point is that the lectures provided Coleridge with invaluable opportunities for (as Crabb Robinson put it somewhat impatiently in 1811) 'dreaming on and playing over certain favourite ideas' (cited LL I 236), and thus refining his definitions of (in this case) the imagination.

Collier's account of lecture 7 of the 1811–12 series reveals Coleridge working through a particularly dynamic definition of the imagination, one which does not have a close syntactic parallel in the *Biographia*, but which clearly informs his thinking in chapter 13. Citing a passage rich in paradox and oxymoron from the first act of *Romeo and Juliet*, Collier writes,

Such passages as these Coleridge dared not declare to be absolutely unnatural because there is an effort in the mind when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and to leave a middle state of the mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between two images: as soon as it is fixed on one it becomes understanding and when it is waving between them attaching itself to neither it is imagination. (LL I 311)²⁴

The key terms here are the participles 'hovering' and 'waving', both demonstrative of what Coleridge immediately hereafter terms 'a strong working of the mind still producing what it still repels & and again calling forth what it again negatives' (LL I 311). This description of the restless, infinitely dynamic activity of the imagination anticipates any number of Coleridge's formulations in chapter 13 regarding what he terms the 'demands' of transcendental philosophy, most prominently in this instance the suppositions that 'two forces should be conceived which counteract each other by their essential nature' and that 'these forces should be assumed to be both alike infinite, both alike indestructible' (BL I 299).²⁵ Collier's account of Coleridge's lecture demonstrates the unscripted

²³ In the relevant notes for the 1808 lecture, Coleridge continues: '... that which after shewed itself in such might & energy in Lear, where the deep anguish of a Father spreads the feeling of Ingratitude & Cruelty over the very Elements of Heaven' (LL I 81), to which he appears to allude in chapter 4 of the *Biographia* when citing Lear's 'apostrophe to the elements' as evidence of the operation of the imagination (BL I 85). This is the first significant engagement with the imagination in the *Biographia*, and it is important to note that Coleridge draws on the Shakespeare lectures to press home his point.

²⁴ In illustration of his claim, Coleridge cites Milton's 'fine description of Death', otherwise 'If substance might be call'd what shadow seem'd, / For each seem'd either' (*Paradise Lost* II 669–70, var.), which he also cites in the 'letter from a friend' in chapter 13 (BL I 301 and n.).

²⁵ See the editors' valuable note here regarding Coleridge's debt to the Fichtean concept of the imagination as that which 'hovers as a single power' between the *Ich* and the *Nicht-Ich* (BL I 299 n.1).

ways in which Coleridge was thinking about the ‘force’ of the imagination, whether force is inflected as modification or fusion (of the many into one), or as the tension that inheres in the activity of the imagination in ‘*still* producing what it *still* repels and *again* calling forth what it *again* negatives’ (emphasis added), as if in preparation for the dicta set forth in the *Biographia*.

With the cryptic and climactic definition of the imagination apparently in place at the end of volume one, Coleridge abruptly turns to Wordsworth in the opening chapter of volume two, as if finally arriving at the aspiration he announced on the opening page of chapter 1 (and briefly touched on in his passing remarks on fancy and the imagination in chapter 4). Distinguishing between Wordsworth’s priority in the *Lyrical Ballads* to write poetry where the subjects, characters, and incidents were ‘chosen from ordinary life’, and his own responsibility to write poetry in which the ‘incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural’, Coleridge quickly clarifies that while he was to have directed his attention to ‘persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic’, it was imperative that in doing so he ‘transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith’ (*BL* II 6). Coleridge’s pronouncement here regarding ‘poetic faith’, as the reader’s voluntary suspension of the operations of his own judgement, is arguably more often cited (in and out of context) than any other formulation in the *Biographia*. It is a formulation so well known that—to paraphrase Coleridge’s remark apropos several unmistakably Wordsworthian lines in ‘The Boy of Winander’—if one were to come across it running wild in the deserts of Arabia, one would cry out ‘Coleridge!’ And it is directly derived from the thinking he did about dramatic illusion in the course of delivering his lectures on Shakespeare.

In two sets of notes that Foakes dates to 1808, Coleridge attempts to explain how ‘Stage Presentations . . . produce a sort of temporary Half-Faith’, through ‘imitating reality under a semblance of reality’, which semblance the spectator ‘encourages in himself & supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part’, a ‘sort of temporary Faith which we encourage by our own Will’ (*LL* I 134, 130). If, for example, a scene of a forest were to be presented onstage,

. . . we know that it is at any time in the power of our will to see it as it is, and no longer as that which it presents to us. Its end is to produce illusion, as far as the nature of the Thing permits, and true stage Illusion both in this and in all other Things consists not in the mind’s judging it to be a Forest but in its remission of the judgment that it is not a Forest. (*LL* I 130)

The central tenet of what Coleridge will later term the reader’s ‘suspension of disbelief’ is legible here in the spectator’s ‘remission of the judgment’ that something is *not*. As Coleridge later formulates this intermediate state of the mind (while dreaming), ‘we neither believe it or disbelieve it—with the will the comparing power is suspended, and without the comparing power any act of

Judgment, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible' (CL IV 641). Neither believing nor disbelieving, the hovering of the mind that Coleridge outlines here closely resembles the 'middle state of mind' that he outlines in lecture 7 of the 1811–12 series (previously cited), one which he argues is 'more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between two images' (LL I 311). Thus, the remission of the judgment that Coleridge first sets forth in the 1808 lecture notes later informs his explanations of both the operation of the poetic imagination and the experience of the reader who, when encountering the supernatural, 'or at least romantic', willingly suspends his disbelief for the moment.²⁶

Having brought his reader to the *Lyrical Ballads*, most pointedly the Preface (his priority being, again, the resolution of the 'long continued controversy' it occasioned), Coleridge announces that he cannot proceed 'to declare once for all, in what points I coincide with [Wordsworth's] opinions, and in what points I altogether differ' without previously, 'in as few words as possible, explain[ing] my ideas, first, of a POEM; and secondly, of POETRY itself, in *kind* and in *essence*'—and, as becomes necessary, of a poet (BL II 10, 10–11). This postponement of his direct engagement with Wordsworth (the first of three such across chapters 14, 15, and 16) provides Coleridge an important opportunity to introduce some of his most trenchant insights regarding the 'distinctions' between these critical terms (as opposed to 'divisions'—for Coleridge, 'distinct notions do not suppose different *things*'²⁷), all of which he began formulating in the Shakespeare lectures, initially in 1808 but most forcefully in the second, third, and fourth lectures of 1811–12. In Tomalin's account of lecture 3, Coleridge emphasized that 'the intelligibility of almost everything he had to say on the subject of poetry would depend [on] his being perspicuous in his definition, because, as he had before said, it often happened that differences between men of good sense arose solely from having attached different ideas to the same words' (LL I 218; cf. BL II 13). Coleridge's 'final definition' of a poem in his notes for lecture 4 (which he repeats almost verbatim in chapter 14) is as follows:

A Poem is that species of composition which being with some others opposed to [works of] Science, as having for its immediate object the communication of Pleasure, not of Truth, is distinguished from all others by proposing to itself such Delight from the Whole as is compatible with a distinct Gratification from each component part. (LL I 245; cf. BL II 13)

Integral to Coleridge's definition here, and to his thinking about organic form ever since the 1790s, is his attention to the necessary relation of the parts to the

²⁶ See also Coleridge's comments in chapter 22, where in lieu of the 'baffled attempts of [Wordsworth] to *make* him believe', Coleridge valorizes 'that *illusion*, contradistinguished from *delusion*, that *negative faith*, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgment' (BL II 134).

²⁷ Foakes cites the following formulation from *The Friend* (II 104n.; cited LL I 84–85 n.33), apropos Coleridge's remarks in the fourth lecture of 1808: 'there alone, as the principle of all things, does distinction exist unaided by division' (LL I 84–85).

whole: if the parts do not correspond to the whole, multēity cannot be ‘fused’ into unity. In a ‘*legitimate* poem’, as Coleridge frames it, the parts of the poem must ‘mutually support and explain each other’ (*BL* II 13), and although ‘a poem of any length neither can be, or ought to be all poetry’, nevertheless ‘the remaining parts must be preserved *in keeping* with the poetry’ (*BL* II 15). Coleridge’s emphasis here, on ‘*in keeping*’, to emphasize the harmony of any given composition, also draws on his thinking about Shakespeare. In an attempt to explain the production of an harmonious whole (even when not all of any given poem may be said to be poetry), Coleridge in 1808 speculates that even as the ‘Poet’s Mind must be diffused over that of the Reader or Spectator . . . he himself, according to his Genius, elevates us, & by being *always in keeping* prevents us from perceiving any strangeness, tho’ we feel great exaltation’ (*LL* I 86–87).²⁸

In slipping from the (‘final’) definition of a poem into a consideration of ‘the poetry’ in any given poem, Coleridge offers another ‘distinction’, since it turns out that ‘What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet’s own mind’ (*BL* II 15). At this pivotal moment in the *Biographia*, Coleridge suggests that his conclusions ‘have been in part anticipated in the preceding disquisition on the fancy and imagination’ (*BL* II 15), which in fact they have not (if Coleridge has in mind the simultaneously dense and oblique conclusion to chapter 13). To remedy this lacuna, he turns (again) to his notes for the Shakespeare lectures, where he delineated ‘the poetic genius’ in lecture 4 of the 1811–12 series in these terms:

A distinction [between ‘Poem’ and ‘Poetry’] resulting from the poetic Genius itself, which sustains and modifies the emotions, thoughts & vivid representations of the Poem by the constant and apparently spontaneous Activity of the Poet’s own powers, more especially of the Imagination, the Fancy, and of that delightful Energy without sense of Effort which our sympathy with the [Sensibilities &] energy without Effort, of the Poet’s own mind, with the continued and spontaneous Activity of his own intellectual powers, more especially of the Imagination, the Fancy, and whatever else with these reveals itself in the balancing & reconciling of opposite or discordant qualities, sameness with difference, a sense of novelty and freshness with old or customary Objects, a more than usual State of Emotion with more than usual Order, Self-possession & Judgment with Enthusiasm and vehement Feeling, and which while it blends and harmonizes the Natural and the Artificial still subordinates Art to Nature, the manner to the matter, and our admiration of the Poet to our sympathy with the Images, Passions, Characters and Incidents of the Poem. (*LL* I 245; cf. *BL* II 15–17)

²⁸ See also lecture 3 of the 1811–12 series: ‘. . . as in a good picture, it is necessary that all things [in a good play] should be in keeping’ (*LL* I 226).

I cite this important passage at such length in order to demonstrate how valuable the lectures were for Coleridge as he worked out his ideas, moving from the sometimes repetitive and circumlocutious formulations above to the crisper declarations in the *Biographia*, such as when he writes in chapter 14 of the ideal poet as one who ‘diffuses a tone, and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination’ (BL II 16). Once again, it is striking to note the degree to which the Shakespeare lectures made the *Biographia* possible. Not simply because Coleridge’s notes provided him with material which he could quarry as he dictated the *Biographia*, but because the occasion of lecturing on Shakespeare (and the principles of poetry that he there sought to define and illustrate) offered him the opportunity to rehearse and revise his definitions as he worked over this material time and again—and thus laid the groundwork for the highly-condensed definitions he offers in the *Biographia*. The lectures provided Coleridge the opportunity of thinking out loud—‘really thinking’, as he put it in the first lecture of 1811–12 (LL I 187). The definition of the poet that emerges above is at once a definition of the imagination (the poet’s ‘genius’ *is* the imagination), a definition that is in ‘practical’ terms more valuable than the pronouncements of chapter 13, and one that, occurring at the end of this central chapter in the *Biographia*, would finally seem to provide Coleridge with all the vocabulary—the critical principles along with the perspicuous definitions—that he needs to undertake his critique of Wordsworth.

The Shakespearean Fulcrum

The opening of chapter 15, however, suggests otherwise. If Coleridge is to apply ‘these principles to purposes of practical criticism’ (BL II 19), he needs first to turn (again!) to Shakespeare as the most exemplary manifestation of poetic power and poetic genius. Why? Because Coleridge cannot make the transition from the theoretical to the practical without Shakespeare. It is no coincidence that Coleridge first uses the formulation ‘practical criticism’ in the opening sentences of chapter 15:

In the application of these principles to purposes of practical criticism as employed in the appraisal of works more or less imperfect, I have endeavoured to discover what the qualities in a poem are, which may be deemed promises and specific symptoms of poetic power, as distinguished from general talent determined to poetic composition by accidental motives, by an act of the will, rather than by the inspiration of a genial and productive nature. In this investigation, I could not, I thought, do better, than keep before me the earliest work of the greatest genius, that perhaps human nature has yet produced, our *myriad-minded* Shakspear. (BL II 19)

Coleridge cannot ‘do better’ than to turn to Shakespeare. As is the case in the second half of chapter 14, Coleridge draws again on material from his lectures, in this case to delineate what he considers the four most prominent symptoms,

or signs, of poetic power. In reframing the material here, Coleridge is simultaneously refining his critical principles, illustrating them with reference to Shakespeare's poetry,²⁹ and establishing the criteria with which he will adjudicate the controversy occasioned by Wordsworth's (mis)understanding of poetic diction. In other words, Shakespeare provides the standard against which Wordsworth is to be measured. Shakespeare (as managed in the lectures) allows Coleridge to navigate the transition from his 'final definitions' of poem, poetry, and poet to his arbitration and evaluation of 'the tenets peculiar to Mr. Wordsworth' (*BL* II 40)—what in his work is truly original, what is misguided, and what, finally, merits Coleridge's canonization of him as the greatest English poet after Shakespeare and Milton.³⁰

Coleridge initially outlined his thoughts on the requisite powers of a great poet in lecture 3 of the 1808 series, occasioned by his analysis of *Venus and Adonis*. Of particular interest to Coleridge are: Shakespeare's 'Power of making everything present to the Imagination'; his sense of beauty; his sympathetic identification with 'things remote from his own feelings'; his understanding of 'Fancy, or the aggregative Power . . . , the bringing together Images dissimilar in the main by one point or more of Likeness'; his power 'to make every thing present by a Series of Images' (which he emphasizes is 'an absolute Essential of Poetry'); his imagination, or the 'power of modifying one image or feeling by the precedent or following ones'; his ability to describe natural objects in terms of human passions; and his 'Energy, depth, and activity of Thought without which a man may be a pleasing and affecting Poet; but never a great one' (*LL* I 66–68). This extraordinary notebook entry outlines the material that Coleridge will revise in lectures 3 and 4 of the 1811–12 series, and later refine as the four criteria for the evaluation of poetic power in chapter 15.

The first point Coleridge develops under the heading of 'characteristics of original poetic genius in general' is 'sweetness of the versification . . . richness and sweetness of sound' (*BL* II 19, 20), which turns out to be far more than merely a prosodic qualification. Whereas 'a man of talents and much reading' may 'acquire' imagery, incidents, feelings, et cetera, only a 'natural poetic genius' will have a sense of sound, which is in turn a signal indicator of the poetic imagination: 'the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a

²⁹ Importantly not his dramatic works, but his narrative poems: Coleridge always thinks of Shakespeare as first and foremost a poet, albeit later in his career a dramatic poet.

³⁰ In his final encomium for Shakespeare, Coleridge locates him 'on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain, with Milton as his compeer not rival', then concludes the chapter with the following citation from one of Wordsworth's political sonnets of 1802:

Must *we* be free or die, who speak the tongue,
Which SHAKESPEARE spake, the faith and morals hold,
Which MILTON held. In every thing we are sprung
Of earth's first blood, have titles manifold.

WORDSWORTH (*BL* II 27, 28)

('It is not to be thought of that the Flood', ll. 11–14; for 'Must *we*' read 'We must'.) Thus, Wordsworth has the last word, and completes the triumvirate, even as the chapter on Shakespeare has postponed Coleridge's direct engagement with him. (See also Coleridge's praise for Wordsworth as standing 'nearest of all modern writers to Shakespear and Milton' [*BL* II 151].)

gift of imagination: and this together with the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some predominant thought or feeling, may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learnt' (*BL* II 20). The 'second promise of genius', already explicitly set forth in 1808, is the choice of subjects 'remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself' (*BL* II 20). Although himself 'unparticipating in the passions' he delineates, Shakespeare nevertheless seems 'more intuitive, more intimately conscious, even than the characters themselves . . . of the flux and reflux of the mind in all its subtlest thoughts and feelings' (*BL* II 21). This leads Coleridge to celebrate the power of Shakespeare's imagery, the way in which 'you seem to be *told* nothing, but to see and hear every thing' (*BL* II 21), which is crucial for Coleridge because images 'become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit' (*BL* II 23). Whereas versification may make audible the work of the imagination, imagery makes it visible, most powerfully in its reduction of multitude (however configured) into unity. Coleridge's final, and properly culminating characteristic is 'DEPTH, and ENERGY of THOUGHT', because for Coleridge, 'no man was ever a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher' (*BL* II 25–26).³¹ Shakespeare is such a poet for Coleridge because in his poems, 'the creative power, and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace' (*BL* II 26).

Each one of the four characteristics Coleridge adumbrates here is effectively a particular inflection of the larger category of the imagination, which Coleridge has been consistently attempting to define since chapter 13.³² Sound and versification are 'a gift of the imagination', a particular means of 'reducing multitude into unity of effect'. The same is true of imagery, modified by passion and also a means of 'reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant'. The choice of subjects remote from the interests of the poet demonstrates the workings of the sympathetic imagination, as celebrated in the identification of Shakespeare with Proteus, capable of 'pass[ing] into all the forms of human character and passion' (*BL* II 27).³³ And the criterion that a great poet must demonstrate activity of thought is necessary for the 'war embrace' between intellectual energy and 'creative power' that characterizes the energy of the imagination. In chapter 14, Coleridge had recourse to his lectures to provide the 'final definition' of a poem and of poetry; in chapter 15, he turns explicitly to his first lectures on Shakespeare in order to clinch his multifaceted definition of the imagination. It turns out that Coleridge cannot define the imagination without

³¹ Compare Coleridge's formulation in the oft-cited letter to William Sotheby of 13 July 1802, in which he maintains, apropos Shakespeare, that 'a great Poet must be, implicitè if not explicitè, a profound Metaphysician' (*CL* II 810).

³² But see also *BL* I 82–88 for Coleridge's first sustained attention to fancy and imagination (with important reference to Shakespeare [*BL* I 85]) and the opening of chapter 10, where Coleridge introduces the term 'esemplastic' (*BL* I 169 and n.).

³³ See also lecture 3 of the 1808 series: 'Nature is the Poet here—but to become by power of Imagination another Thing—Proteus, a river, a lion, yet still the God to be felt there' (*LL* I 69).

engaging Shakespeare—which is yet another way of noting that he could not have written the *Biographia* without having lectured on Shakespeare and the principles of poetry.

‘What then shall we say?’, Coleridge asks, rounding to his conclusion:

. . . even this; that Shakspeare, no mere child of nature; no automaton of genius; no passive vehicle of inspiration possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge became habitual and intuitively wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power, by which he stands alone, with no equal or second in his own class. (*BL* II 26–27)

All the material for this final accolade was, of course, first rehearsed in the lectures. But what then shall we say of Coleridge? Coleridge admired in Shakespeare what he described as ‘that sublime faculty, by which a great mind becomes that which it meditates on’ (*LL* I 81). In a similar fashion, it was in meditating as long as he did on Shakespeare—whether in his notebooks, his letters, or at the lectern—that Coleridge became the critic he did. He studied Shakespeare patiently, meditated him deeply, and understood him minutely, until he arrived at his own ‘stupendous power’ as a critic. Without Coleridge’s lifelong engagement with Shakespeare (most prominently on display in the lectures), he could not have defined the imagination in the ways that he was finally able to articulate, nor could he have assembled the critique of Wordsworth that he did. In sum, there would not have been a *Biographia Literaria*.³⁴

³⁴ The author would like to acknowledge the extraordinary editorial work done by Walter Jackson Bate, James Engell, and R. A. Foakes on the *Biographia Literaria* as well as the materials pertaining to the lectures on Shakespeare for the *Collected Coleridge*. Their labours have made possible so much subsequent criticism. The author would also like to thank James Engell and Adam Roberts for their detailed comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article.