Saving Sarah Fricker: Accurately Representing the Realities of the Coleridges' Marriage

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Abstract

The Lake Poets circle was prolific; they wrote letters to each other constantly, leaving a clear picture of the beginning and eventual decline of the marriage between Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Sarah Fricker Coleridge. Coleridge also was fond of chronicling his personal life in his work. Coleridge's poetry and prose clearly show that, though he may have come to regret it, he originally married Sarah Fricker for love and was very happy in the beginning of their relationship. The problem with their marriage was that they were just fundamentally incompatible, something that was not Sarah Fricker's fault—she was a product of her society and simply unprepared to be a wife to someone like Coleridge. Unfortunately, scholars have taken Coleridge's letters as pure truth and seem to have forgotten that every marriage has two partners, both with their own perspectives. This reflects a deliberate ignorance of Coleridge's tendency to see situations quite differently from how they actually were. Because of this tradition, Sarah Fricker Coleridge is often portrayed as difficult at best and a harridan at worst. It does not help that she attempted to help her husband's reputation by the majority of their letters that she possessed—one cannot see her side as clearly. In this essay, I hope to prove that she was simply an unhappy wife, married to a poetic genius who had decided she was the impediment to his happiness while she only wanted to keep their family together and safe.

In a letter to Thomas Wedgwood written at Keswick on October 20, 1802, Samuel Taylor Coleridge complains bitterly about his unfeeling, disagreeable wife: "Ill tempered Speeches sent after me when I went out of the house, ill-tempered Speeches on my return, my friends received with freezing looks, the least opposition or contradiction occasioning screams of passion, & the sentiments, which I held most base, ostentatiously avowed" (Griggs 876). With descriptions like this, it is no wonder that scholars have often painted Sarah Fricker Coleridge as difficult at best and a frigid harridan at worst.[1] This is terribly unfortunate in two senses: first, it reflects deliberate ignorance of extant primary sources, namely those letters written by Mrs. Coleridge and others in the Lake Poets' circle, and second, it tends to create a two-dimensional portrait of a woman unprepared to be a genius's wife rather than reflect the intelligent, though fairly traditional, young woman she was. While Sarah Fricker Coleridge may not have been the best wife *for* Coleridge, she certainly tried to be a good wife *to* him. She obviously loved him—and in the beginning, at least, he clearly loved her. Because Coleridge was so honest about his feelings in both his poetry and prose, the evolution of his relationship with Sarah can be definitively traced as his portrayal of her shifts from beloved partner to impediment to his happiness.

Scholars have long noted the importance of considering Coleridge's everyday concerns in connection with his work. In his introduction to *Minnow among Tritons*, the collection of Sarah Fricker Coleridge's letters to Thomas Poole, Stephen Potter explains the unique impact Coleridge's life had on his poetry: the quotidian is

> deeply felt and freely expressed, [so that] we seem to be reading about such crises as the death of a son, or the borrowing of a book, such states as marriage unhappiness, or unwillingness to answer a letter, as if they were happening for the first time. Intimate details . . . are significant because they really are intimate [;] they really do touch Coleridge's life closely. (vii-xiii)

While this is certainly true, the events Coleridge writes about are colored by his own interpretations of them, and for a man known to take perceived slights very personally—the break with Wordsworth comes to mind here—not everything he says can be trusted implicitly. It is necessary, therefore, to read all available primary sources to get a more complete view of how events truly unfolded. In doing so, a portrait of the Coleridges' marriage emerges that runs counter to the accepted narrative.

In 1794, young Coleridge had recently met and befriended Robert Southey, whom he met in Oxford while he was still enrolled at Cambridge and Southey was a student at Balliol. In their philosophical conversations, they often discussed gathering twelve men of like mind and establishing a utopian settlement in America that valued literary efforts

1. This is the original spelling of her name; Coleridge insisted that she spell it without an *h* because he preferred it that way—he made the same change in Sara Hutchinson's name—and scholars have continued this trend. Kathleen Jones suggests that "[t]his renaming may well have been a symptom of a hidden desire to remake the women in his life into something closer to his inmost fantasies" (47). I will refer to Sarah by the name she went by until she met and married Coleridge primarily to distinguish her from Sara Hutchinson. I also think it is important to return at least that much agency to her.

and reflective thought, a plan they termed "Pantisocracy,"[2] Southey and Coleridge soon realized that if their plan was to work, the men would need wives. In August of that same year, Southey became engaged to Edith Fricker, a young woman who lived in Bristol. Edith had four sisters; one of them, Mary, was already married to Robert Lovell, a Quaker poet who shared the friends' enthusiasm for the Pantisocracy project, but pretty, lively Sarah, the eldest, was as yet unmarried, and it was upon her that Coleridge fixed his attentions. Quite characteristically, Coleridge was exuberant in his courtship, and though Sarah was not initially receptive, the poet's charm won her over, as did his stories of a childhood with a cold, unfeeling family. He impulsively proposed barely two weeks after they met (Hill 3-4; Potter viii-vx; Lefebure 41-43; Vickers 71; Wilson 62; Jones 13-16).

Sarah was elated over their engagement, but Coleridge soon regretted it—the proposal was made "in an impetuous moment of enthusiasm" (Hill 4), after all. He left Bristol for Cambridge and later London, at which point he decided that he did not love Sarah and looked for ways to get out of the marriage. After Sarah expressed her concern over Coleridge's lack of communication with her, Southey wrote to Coleridge to admonish him to correspond more often with his fiancée; this letter was met with Coleridge's new certainty that he was again in love with Mary Evans, a woman he had attempted to court before going to Bristol. Evans was already engaged, however, and he moved on to Miss Brunton,[3] an actress (Jones 16-20; Potter x; Griggs 109; Lefebure 44-51; Vickers 71-72). Coleridge wrote to Southey that the relationship was intended to put the duty of which he had been reminded forefront in his mind:

> I endeavored to be perpetually with Miss Brunton—I even hoped that her Exquisite Beauty and uncommon Accomplishments might have cured one Passion by another. The latter I could easily have dissipated in her absence—and so have restored my affections to her, whom I do not love—but whom by every tie of Reason and Honor I ought to love. I am resolved—but wretched!—But Time shall do much. (Griggs 113)

Later letters, however, showed that he had renewed his attachment to Mary Evans. This alarmed Southey enough to write his friend and press the issue of his previous arrangement with Sarah; Coleridge gave in, responding, "*I will do my Duty*" (Griggs 145).

Scholars have sometimes quickly dismissed this move of Southey's as a mere stepping stone in the path of Coleridge's unhappiness, but it is important to point out that Southey was not simply acting as Sarah's intermediary. Upon his engagement to Edith, he essential-

2. Coleridge took the word from Greek, using the roots *pant-isocratia*, which means "the government of all." The men would work together to make decisions, using the dictates of rational benevolence to come to mutual decisions to govern the group so that no one had more power than another. They would give up their possessions and work for and with each other; in theory, no one would have to labor more than a few hours each day, leaving plenty of time for intellectual pursuits. Even while they worked, however, poetry and philosophy would be on their minds; for example, the solitude of farming chores would be the perfect time to compose verses.

3. Scholars seem to be divided on whether the Miss Brunton in question was Elizabeth or Ann; both were on the stage when Coleridge was in London.

ly became head of the Frickers' household; their father was dead, and George, the youngest sibling and only boy, was still quite young. It fell to Southey to defend the sisters and help protect their reputations, something that was often vulnerable since their time and education in Bath had left an impression that the girls were not always as well-behaved as society might hope. Southey sought to remind Coleridge of the promise he made to Sarah because if he broke their engagement, it would appear to be her fault—that is, that he had discovered something about her to make him reconsider. At this time, that was often code for learning that one's intended wife was unchaste (Jones 4, 15-18; Potter xxvi; Lefebure 61).

Though he was not particularly well-versed in the unspoken rules of female society and was perhaps unaware of the implications of Sarah's being tossed aside by her fiancé, Southey knew that a break with Coleridge would damage Sarah's reputation and could render her unmarriageable. This could not happen for practical reasons—he would not relish supporting even more of Edith's family—and personal ones; he and Sarah had become good friends, and he was loath to see her hurt since she genuinely cared for Coleridge. In fact, as Sarah's biographer, Molly Lefebure, has emphasized, Sarah had other suitors; it could be inferred that if Coleridge did cry off, she likely would have been able to make a quick marriage and save her good name. She clearly wanted to marry for love. Still, this concern of Southey's for Sarah's happiness and reputation is a bit ironic since both Edith and Sarah ended up "ruined" in the eyes of society after they accompanied Southey and Coleridge on a trip to the Wye Valley and Tintern Abbey in April 1795. The weather interfered with their plans and the sisters were forced to stay in an inn overnight with their fiancés without the benefit of a chaperone. Any objections Mrs. Fricker and her family might have had to her daughters marrying poor poets—one of whom was known to have a laudanum habit—disappeared in their concern for Sarah and Edith's reputations and they were married to Coleridge and Southey, respectively, within the year (Jones 18-24; Vickers 72; Lefebure 55-65).

Because Coleridge proposed to Sarah so soon after they met, many critics interpret his impulsive offer as an outgrowth of his excitement over Pantisocracy. Kathleen Jones disagrees, noting that

> Coleridge's views on love would not have allowed him to contemplate marriagewithout emotional involvement—he regarded sex without love as extremely sordid, writing later to Southey that the idea of having sexual intercourse with Sarah without love, even within marriage, would have reduced her to the level of a common prostitute . . . His first letter to Southey after his return to London was certainly written in the belief that his feelings were real. (16-7)

Though Coleridge later claimed that his proposal was prompted by lust, his earlier words show that at the time, at least, he believed he loved Sarah and truly wanted to marry her. It is possible, of course, that Coleridge was, as Jones asserts, "in love with love" and very attracted to Sarah (17). His notebooks support this idea, but they also tell the story of a man who fell quickly in love, which led him to question the honesty of his feelings. After returning to his fiancée, he gave every appearance of being devoted to her; Thomas De Quincey

later wrote that a mutual friend's interactions with the poet at this time convinced him that Coleridge obviously loved Sarah deeply (Lefebure 52).[4]

"Lines Written at Shurton Bars," originally titled "Epistle" and then "Ode to Sara: Lines written at Shurton Bars, near Bridgwater, September 1795, in Answer to a Letter from Bristol," exemplifies Coleridge's early feelings for Sarah. Written as a response to a letter he received from his fiancée a week before their wedding that detailed her sorrow in the face of family stress and opposition toward and gossip about her relationship with him, Coleridge's verses explode with enthusiasm to finally marry Sarah. Here we see the passion in their relationship; there is a deep intensity in these lines. As always, his mind can conjure up any number of things to worry about, but to combat that, her "soul has wing'd it's [*sic*] way" (*RT* 23) to him.[5] Coleridge does not just remember her in fondness and love; he says that her soul "hovers round my head" (*RT* 24). He misses her and the comfort they afford each other, but he also looks forward to the time that they can consummate their relationship—with their wedding fast approaching, that was likely at the front of his mind:

> How oft, my Love! with shapings sweet
> I paint the moment, we shall meet!
> With eager speed I dart—
> I seize you in the vacant air,
> And fancy, with a Husband's care
> I press you to my heart! (*RT* 85-90)

Their sexual attraction aside, Coleridge awaits the time that he can again be with his Sarah; the poem resonates with that longing. The power of their love is such that their souls meet in the air to explore the beauty that surrounds him, beauty that would be more intense if she were there.

Coleridge also featured Sarah in a poem that explored his feelings about his own mind. "The Eolian Harp," written between August of 1795 and the beginning of 1796—four early manuscript versions exist—offers a portrait of the young lovers as they snuggle at sunset and listen to the notes of an Aeolian harp in the window, a peaceful beginning that quickly becomes an exploration of the differences of the poet's mind from his beloved's—and by extension, from the rest of the conventional English society to which she belonged. Coleridge begins with Sarah, reclining peacefully next to him in front of their cottage, and lets his mind wander, infusing their natural surroundings with the emotions that he is feeling. He even goes so far as to put the elements of Nature in a similar position to his; as he romances his willing fiancée, the wind does the same to a nearby lute, which offers up a beautiful melody in return:

4. Students of the period will note that this is out of character for De Quincey, who is well known for his low estimation of Sarah Coleridge's intelligence, particularly when compared to Dorothy Wordsworth. The fact that he chose to record it suggests that it is very likely true.

5. Mays compiled both a reading (RT) and a variorum text (VT); both have been helpful in my study here. The reading text gives the version scholars deem closest to Coleridge's intention, while the variorum text shows all possible versions.

> And that simplest Lute,
> Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
> How by the desultory breeze caressed,
> Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
> It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
> Tempt to repeat the wrong! . . . . (*RT* 12-17)

Everything in Nature is harmonious, and their love places Coleridge and Sarah within that context—this is no mere country scene, it is paradisiacal. The couple is alone amid the beauty given to them by God; this is beauty reflected in the love between a man and wife, a love in which they will soon partake.

Still, the couple is not the same person; Coleridge is much more philosophical and excitable than the rational, even-tempered Sarah. Whereas she simply enjoys a peaceful time with her fiancé, he cannot stop the wanderings of his mind—"many idle flitting phantasies, / Traverse [his] indolent and passive brain" (*RT* 40-41). The content of these wanderings highlights another of their major differences. Sarah also represents traditional religion, specifically Anglicanism, in the poem; in contrast to Coleridge's pantheistic mental meanderings, Coleridge says that she "biddest me walk humbly with my God" (*RT* 52), a nearly direct quotation from the Old Testament prophet Micah that characterizes her as a conventional woman of her time,[6] ever ready to bring her Samuel back down to earth and remind him of his more important duties, both to her and to his God. Nothing in the poem suggests that he is frustrated or angered by this; he seems to appreciate the grounding effect she has on him.

Coleridge and Sarah were married on October 4, 1795, and a letter written to Thomas Poole not long after reflects Coleridge's ecstasy over the estate: "On Sunday Morning I was *married* . . .united to the woman, [*sic*] whom I love best of all created Beings.—We are settled—nay—quite domesticated at Clevedon—Our comfortable Cot!—!— Mrs Coleridge—MRS COLERIDGE!!—I like to *write* the name—" (Griggs 160). These are not the words of a man forced into marriage; Coleridge sounds like a newlywed, albeit one given to effusions over everything that excited him in any way. The couple took a honeymoon in their cottage at Clevedon; Coleridge famously only furnished the house with a bed, an Aeolian harp, and some old prints. Two days later, he wrote to Joseph Cottle, his publisher, to ask for further supplies, and the couple continued on in the same blissful, though poverty-stricken, manner. By April of 1796, Sarah was certain she was pregnant—the debilitating morning sickness helped her understand that while it annoyed Coleridge—and Coleridge's cravat began to feel a little tighter. Hartley was born in September of that same year, followed by Berkeley in May of 1798, and Sarah's focus shifted from making Coleridge happy to taking care of her growing family. For Coleridge's part, the addition of Hartley, though joyous, felt like an encumbrance, and his letters feature less celebration and more complaining. This is also the period where Coleridge was diagnosed with a "nervous

6. Micah 6:8: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (King James Version)

disorder" and prescribed larger doses of laudanum; his increasing dissatisfaction came from a number of areas, but the opium certainly did not help (Lefebure 69-97; Vickers 73; Jones 47-54; Potter xv-xvi).

Though they were happy in the early years of their marriage, Coleridge and Sarah's relationship was not without its difficulties—primarily, the questions of how Coleridge would earn a regular salary and if he would enter a more conventional profession to support his wife and their two young children bothered Sarah. *The Watchman*, Coleridge's attempt to put out a periodical, had failed not long after it began, leaving their finances in ruins. Luckily, Coleridge had an annuity from the Wedgwood brothers as well as support from Thomas Poole, a patron and friend who lived at Nether Stowey; he was also paid here and there from various published writings. Still, Sarah recognized that this hand-to-mouth existence, though romantic on one's honeymoon, was no way to support a family, and the household's lack of steady income was a sore point between the couple. Coleridge was also responsible for Sarah's mother and brother at this time, which added further stress (Vickers 73-74; Christie 59; Lefebure 90; Jones 50-52).

Another stumbling block arrived in the form of the Wordsworths; their philosophical and outdoorsy ways that Coleridge so delighted in only served to highlight Sarah's fairly traditional outlook and upbringing, and she was found wanting in comparison. The fall of 1797 and spring of 1798, so famous for its end result, *Lyrical Ballads*, was an important time in Coleridge's relationship with William and Dorothy[7]; it also coincided with the infancy of his children, which limited Sarah's ability to ramble about the Lake District with the trio. In Coleridge's eyes, Sarah—though intelligent—paled next to Dorothy, who possessed real genius. As for Dorothy, she had no real use for Sarah, with her Bath manners, lack of concern about philosophical matters, and modern ways of raising children; the fact that she preferred to care for her child as much as possible, a lifestyle which included breastfeeding on demand, was foreign to Dorothy, and smacked of the lower classes. Sarah was a bit jealous of the amount of time her husband spent with the Wordsworths, but there was a much larger concern: William and Dorothy were enabling Coleridge's addiction. They did not attempt to dissuade Coleridge from taking the drug as often as he did; instead, they were impressed by its poetic and philosophic results. Nor "did they protest when [his mental] excursions were made down the laudanum-impregnated streams of Fancy" (Lefebure 95). Sarah and Poole worried especially about the Wordsworths' general dismissal of the severity of Coleridge's laudanum addiction. It should not be inferred that the siblings approved of it—it is much more likely that they simply had very little experience with an addict and the many ways one could hide the extent of their dependence (Vickers 73-74; Lefebure 91-97; Jones 59-66; Hill 6-7).

In the spring of 1798, it became clear that the Wordsworths would be moving on from Alfoxden; their lease would not be renewed because of "the reputation of the group as anarchists" (Jones 70). For his part, Coleridge decided to go to Germany to learn the language

7. Dorothy was William's sister, companion, and an accomplished writer. Her journals not only detail Wordsworth's movements and habits, but they also give deep insight into many Romantic figures.

and put himself in the center of the intellectual revolution happening in the universities. He left in September of that year without his family; the boys were thought to be too young to travel abroad. He promised to be an assiduous correspondent during his absence, however, and kept this promise, writing long, passionate letters to Sarah that assured her of his continued love for her as well as his pain at being parted from her and their children: "'every night when I go to bed & every night when I rise' I will think of you with a yearning love, & of my blessed Babies! . . . I think of you with affection & a desire to be home /& in the full & holiest sense of the word, & . . . will be, I trust, your Husband faithful unto Death" (Griggs 415-18). Though he might have been feeling the stress of being a husband and father, Coleridge seemed to enjoy the position, at least at this time (Jones 70-74; Lefebure 97-98).

During the eleven months he was away from Nether Stowey, Sarah and the children grew ill as a result of a faulty smallpox vaccine. Baby Berkeley's immune system did not recover, and he died from consumption, which he caught from the nanny. His decline was fairly quick, but it was painful. Sarah was devastated, and her grief was reflected physically: her thick brown hair, long considered her great beauty, began to fall out and was never the same—she had to cut it off and wear a wig for the rest of her life. Coleridge was also feeling quite depressed at this time, not because he knew of Berkeley's passing, but because Sarah had ceased writing to him and he felt ignored. Poole felt that Coleridge should be kept apprised of only happy news so that his studies would proceed accordingly, and, at this time, Sarah naturally could think of nothing amusing to say. Eventually Sarah pressed upon Poole the importance of telling Coleridge about his son's death; Poole's letter was not entirely clear, so Sarah had to write Coleridge herself, pouring out her suffering on the page and likely expecting a similar response. She did not get it; instead, Coleridge spoke of his son's death in philosophical, detached terms. He also decided to extend his stay in Germany for five more months, a choice that reflects his lifelong tendency to "[run] away from situations or [hide] his true feelings, in direct proportion to the urgency of the duty or the depth of the feeling. Those he most loved were likely to be the worst treated" (Jones 81). This habit was in full force when Sarah wrote him in May of 1799 to request he come home to her and Coleridge decided instead to take a walking tour of the Harz Mountains and climb the Brocken (Hill 11; Lefebure 104-20; Jones 75-81; Vickers 76).

For someone who so loved to examine the quotidian in his poetry, Coleridge was not prepared to experience it—the monotony of domesticity bored him. When he returned from Germany in July, Coleridge had a difficult time adjusting to life back with the wife and child he had so longed to see; he spent a great deal of the next year traveling, during which time he visited the Wordsworths and met Sara Hutchinson, the sister of Wordsworth's future wife, Mary. It is at this point in the marriage that letters from and about the couple begin to strongly reflect the idea of Coleridge as an unhappy, neglectful husband and Sarah as a confused—and frankly, angry—young wife. Interestingly, the first person to hear of the beginnings of Coleridge's descent into dejection was his brother-in-law. A letter dated October 21, 1801 lays the groundwork for the opinions he has recently formed about

his wife—opinions that he would later claim had existed since their marriage. Coleridge writes, "alas! we are not suited to each other ... I will go believing that it will end happily—if not, if our mutual unsuitableness continues, and (as it assuredly will do, if it continue[s]) increases & strengthens, why then, it is better for her & my children,[8] that I should live apart, than that she should be a Widow & they Orphans" (Griggs 767). In the beginning, Coleridge does take some blame—they are mutually unsuitable—but hopes that things will improve between them. However, it is not long before he abandons this idea and paints Sarah as the impediment to his happiness—a happiness that includes another woman (Hill 12; Vickers 76; Potter xx; Jones 85-87).

In November of 1799, Coleridge began an extended stay with the Wordsworths, leaving his family at home in Nether Stowey. It is during this trip that he met Sara Hutchinson and fell in love; in his notebooks, he described it as an "incurable" wound from Love's arrow (qtd. in Jones 87). In December, he accepted a job with the *Morning Post* and went to live in London; Sarah and Hartley joined him soon after. Sarah was pregnant again within a month. However, it appears the only harmony they found was sexual, and they fought constantly. Coleridge's dependence on opium also increased; his sicknesses were not something easily diagnosed, as he grew ill when he was anxious, and he did not lack for that unpleasant emotion during this time. Thus began a vicious cycle—he and Sarah would quarrel, he would take laudanum to console himself, the drug would dull his senses enough to frustrate his wife, they would have another fight, and he would again self-medicate. Clearly, the failure of the Coleridges' marriage had a number of causes (Hill 12-14; Lefebure 124-51; Jones 89-90).

Sarah left for Bristol in March of 1800 and later settled at Greta Hall, Keswick, in July. April saw Coleridge's trip to Grasmere, his wife forgotten for a time and a lock of Sara Hutchinson's hair in his pocket. Coleridge seemed to understand that there was no real future for the two of them, but, as Stephen Potter explains, it should not be considered "an instance of Coleridge finding 'ought not' as provocative of action" (Potter xxiii). Coleridge loved Sara Hutchinson a great deal—at least, he loved the person he believed her to be. Sara was his muse and long-suffering supporter, a refuge from his wife who seemed to him only to want to discuss what he needed to do for his family, and his convictions would not let him leave Sarah for her, no matter how unhappy his marriage was. On the evening of April 4, 1802, his grief over the situation, exacerbated by the large amounts of laudanum he was ingesting daily, led him to pour out his emotions in a verse letter to Sara, titled "A Letter to ——" to protect her identity—and likely, her reputation, which would be ruined if a passionate love letter from a married man was found to be addressed to her (Jones 90; Potter xxiii-xiv; Lefebure 146).

The letter went unpublished, though he did show it to the Wordsworths, and it is "accusatory and self-flagellating, poring over the details of his star-crossed love for Sara Hutchinson and explicitly attributing his failure in part to the misery of cohabitating with an unsympathetic woman" (Christie 150). "A Grief without a pang, void, dark, & drear, /

8. By this point, the Coleridges had another son, Derwent, born in September of 1800.

A stifling, drowsy, unimpassion'd Grief / That finds no natural Outlet, no Relief / In word, or sigh, or tear—" (lines 17-20): Coleridge's love for Sara is deep, true, and impossible. As he attempts to explain his love—and apologize for various things—Coleridge rewrites his entire marriage, turning Sarah into a cold, unfeeling woman who might be the mother of his children but also exists to snuff out his happiness. He complains:

> . . . my coarse domestic Life has known
> No Habits of heart-nursing Sympathy,
> No Griefs, but such as dull and deaden me,
> No mutual mild Enjoyments of it's [*sic*] own,
> No Hopes of it's [*sic*] own Vintage, None, o! none—
> . . . . . .
> My little Children are a Joy, a Love,
> A good Gift from above!
> But what is Bliss, that still calls up a Woe,
> And makes it doubly keen
> Compelling me to *feel*, as well as KNOW,
> What a most blessed Lot mine might have been (*VT* 258-77).

Even his children, though a blessing, are burdens—another obstacle that keeps him from his beloved.

"A Letter to ——" was later heavily edited into the *Dejection* ode of October 1802; without knowledge of its beginnings, the poem reads as if the dejection Coleridge feels comes solely from his disconnection to nature. J. C. C. Mays notes that the verse letter was not found until 1937 (677), but there was another extant Coleridgean outpouring that made his feelings about his wife perfectly clear. On November 22, 1802, Coleridge wrote the now infamous passive-aggressive letter to Sarah wherein he explains that, if he speaks harshly to her or distresses her with his words, it is her fault and she should be careful not to upset him: "Be assured, my dear Love! that I shall never write otherwise than *most* kindly to you, except after great *Aggressions* on your part" (Griggs 887). He follows this up by claiming that "in sex, acquirements, and in the quantity and quality of natural endowments whether of Feeling, or of Intellect, you are the Inferior" (Griggs 888). Combined with his continued praise of Sara Hutchinson, his callous attitude must have made it clear that the loving man Sarah had married was gone. A more pessimistic view of Coleridge's words and his general temperament would give rise to the opinion that he was unfulfilled by one wife and, in fact, would have preferred to have many women around to serve his various needs: Sarah to mother his children and satisfy him sexually, Sara to challenge his mind, and Dorothy to flatter him as she did William. Scholars like Kathleen Jones and Molly Lefebure have made such claims, explaining that Sarah was simply not equipped to play this role; she was not one to indulge a man's shortcomings. Whether or not that is accurate, one thing is certain—Coleridge was constantly looking for someone to love him fully and self-sacrificingly, almost to the point of ignoring their own needs, and he never really found that person (Jones 11; Lefebure 76-78).

On October 23, 1806, Samuel Taylor Coleridge went north to negotiate a permanent separation from his wife. Naturally, Sarah resisted; society could be cruel to abandoned wives, and she worried about what would become of her and her children. Still, she eventually acquiesced—albeit reluctantly—sometime before Christmas that same year (Christie 166). They stayed in touch through letters, writing primarily of their children, and a friendship of sorts came about. Coleridge found a sanctuary with the Gillmans, and Sarah devoted herself to mothering Hartley, Derwent, and Sara *fille*. Still, her letters to Thomas Poole, as chatty and friendly as they are, reflect a constant awareness of her failed marriage. Though Sarah was ultimately a happy and fulfilled woman, she clearly would have preferred that her relationship with Coleridge had not taken the turn that it did. Sarah made an effort to stay informed about his life—she paid particular attention to his health—and communicated his status to his old friends. When she mentions Coleridge in her letters, her tone holds no rancor; if there were no evidence to the contrary, some of her missives might read as if they had reconciled. Unfortunately, Sarah also burned a great many letters that she wrote her husband, as well as anything she thought that might have embarrassed the family. Because of this, we essentially only get his side of the story of their marriage—most of the letters she burned came from the period they lived together. However, there are some surviving pieces of her later writing, and her relationship with her husband provided a great deal of gossip fodder for the Wordsworth-Coleridge circle, many of whom were assiduous letter writers and journal keepers. Though some progress has been made on this front, it is imperative that the reality of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's marriage to Sarah Fricker be better represented in scholarship, not simply to provide a more accurate portrait, but to help rescue the reputation of a misunderstood woman.

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