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Coleridge, Wordsworth and Thelwall's *Fairy of the Lake*

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ALLEGORY, specifically Jacobin allegory as Michael Scrivener and John Barrell show us,[1] is always open to re-interpretation, or misinterpretation. John Thelwall's *The Fairy of the Lake,* much of it based on Dryden and Purcell's dramatic opera, is just such an allegorical piece, and this paper is an enquiry into what might have been the response of some of Thelwall's readers, Coleridge and Wordsworth principally, to a play which purports to be about King Arthur, and celebrates the specifically British patriotism which the period in which it was written, 1800-1801, demanded of radicals and conservatives alike. Given Thelwall's determined stance against the 'gagging acts' of 1796 in choosing to lecture on Roman history whilst continuing to propound his democratic principles and reformist views, and the ambiguity which was a 'necessary feature of the radical verse' published during the period,[2] any reading of Thelwall's work must allow for both a misreading and the necessary sense of doubt which covert allusion must generate if it is to evade clear detection of specific intent. Coleridge's only reference to the play in answering Thelwall's letter of 1801 which asked for advice on his method of publication, (he published it by subscription) and his advertisement (he does not seem to have sent the work itself) is one of seemingly baffled, yet alarmed, concern.

> I should conjecture that you have written me some letter, which must have miscarried, judging by the enigmatic style of some parts of that which I received yesterday;…—I allude to 'the secret expedition' which you talk of; the word 'secret' is a word I detest—& I know of no expeditions but those to Holland, Ferrol, & Egypt.—And what connection your 'Lady of the Lake' has with this expedition; in other words, the meaning of the phrase The Lady of the Lake *therefore*, quite eludes my powers of deciphering, which are in truth sufficiently blunt.[3] (CL II 723)

This secret expedition which Thelwall connects with Coleridge and the play has apparently riled Coleridge enough for him to write that besides 'politics, religion and metaphysics', something they had always openly differed on, they now have another difference which cannot be reconciled, that of 'taste'. He also, importantly for my reading, informs Thelwall that the cant phrase 'Lady of the Lake' refers to a woman of pleasure, in other words a mistress. A reading of the play goes some way towards deciphering Thelwall's cryptic allusions, but not far. It is, as Jonathan Wordsworth writes in his introduction to *Poems Written Chiefly in Retirement*, 'strange'.[4] If the play is in bad taste, it is,

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1 See Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall & Jacobin Writing*, (Pennsylvania State UP, 2001) and John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793-1796*, (Oxford: 0xford, 2000)

2 Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars:Visions of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), 10

3 CL II 723

4 Introduction, John Thelwall, *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement, 1801*, (Oxford: Woodstock Books,1989)

or could be read as such, at the expense of Wordsworth and Coleridge. How it might have been read is the subject of this paper.

Nicholas Roe shows us that Thelwall seems to have understood Coleridge better than many, in referring to his letter of 1798 to one of his patrons, Dr Crompton, and Thelwall's characterisation of Coleridge as a latter day Tristram Shandy. Thelwall, not without some envy perhaps, and pointing out Coleridge's indolent habits, informs Crompton of the generous annuity from the Wedgwood brothers, but hopes that he has refused the Unitarian ministry offered at Shrewsbury.

> … for I know he cannot preach very often without travelling from the pulpit to the Tower – Mount him upon his darling hobby horse 'the republic of God's own making', and away he goes like hey go mad, spattering & splashing through thick and thin & scattering more levelling sedition, & constructive treason, than poor Gilly, or myself ever dreamt of.[5]

What I would like to consider here is just how much further Thelwall took the analogy of the character of the traditionally courteous Sir Tristram, and what its consequences might have been for the friendship. More importantly, perhaps, is how the publication of Thelwall's book and his subsequent pamphlet 'battle' with the critic Frances Jeffrey may have affected the trajectory of Wordsworth and Coleridge's literary careers. The progress of Thelwall's career as a poet in 1803, the year Jeffrey reviewed *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement,* in which the play appeared, seems to me to have affected Wordsworth and Coleridge, as well as Southey, and the play may well be the origin of them being characterised as the lake poets. The book had appeared before *The Edinburgh Review* was launched, and perhaps was already known to Jeffrey.

Jeffrey takes little notice of *The Fairy of the Lake* in the short review, stating only that it was 'full of freezing spirits, and songs about ale'.[6] He mainly targets the *Prefatory Memoir*. Thelwall hit back with a one hundred and thirty page pamphlet and Jeffrey published a witty rejoinder. But when Thelwall's reply to the lawyer Jeffrey in 1804 quoted Wordsworth's *The Poet's Epitaph*, specifically the stanza on the sallow faced lawyer, on the title page, Wordsworth would be forever associated by Jeffrey with Thelwall's vituperative and ill directed challenge.[7] Thelwall's initial shot had been that the book should not have been reviewed at all, since it was privately published by subscription only, which suggests the play's veiled allusions could be personal or literary, rather than directly political.

[5] Quoted in Nicholas Roe, *Coleridge and John Thelwall: Medical Science, Politics and Poetry*, (*The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series no 3, (Spring 1994 [pages not numbered]).

[6] *The Edinburgh Review*, April 1803. Jeffrey sneers at Thelwall's *Prefatory Memoir* but wishes the poet well.

[7] John Thelwall, *Mr Thelwall's Reply to the Calumnies, Misrepresentations, and Literary Forgeries Contained in the Anonymous Observations on The Letter to the Editor of The Edinburgh Review; With a further exposition of the ungrammatical Ignorance of the Writers and Vindicators of that Defamatory Journal*, (Glasgow, 1804)

Though the play can be read as a political allegory, particularly in relation to Catherine the Great and the 1796 alliance with Britain, the subject of Coleridge's *Religious Musings*, I wish to concentrate on Thelwall's claim in his prefatory memoir that he presents himself to the public in the 'character of the poet', not the politician, and to the ways in which Wordsworth's 'manifesto', as Jeffrey called it in his 1802 review of Southey's *Thalaba*, may be read as at the heart of Thelwall's staging of the overthrow of one order and the commencement of another: the overthrow of gaudy poetic diction.

The play's intricate plot involves the attempted seduction of Arthur by Rowenna, wife of the Saxon king, Vortigern – who is also the father of Arthur's betrothed, Guinevere. Rowenna is a sorceress and uses the daemon Incubus to entrap Arthur and spirit away his knights, Tristram and the squire Scout, in order to prevent him rescuing Guinevere, from the rapacious and incestuous advances of her father Vortigern. Arthur's magic sword is the weapon he ought to use against Rowenna and Vortigern but it is useless alone and he is assisted by the inspired Tristram and, ultimately, the mysterious foil to Rowenna's magic powers, the Fairy of the Lake. The final scene sees Arthur crowned with a coronal by the Welsh bard Taliesin and his wedding to Guinevere, his more natural and still chaste bride.

The hero is almost seduced by a dancing circle of effeminate Daemons of the Noon into slumbering away his time, wasting his talents perhaps, in a vale of enchantment. In this central scene the roused Arthur deplores the murder of an 'elected king' and husband, but Vortigern is also presented to him as a would-be incestuous father. This is very similar to Wordsworth's play *The Borderers* which was read at Alfoxden when Thelwall was visiting in 1797, the occasion of Coleridge's 'spy-nosey' affair. The connections may be arbitrary, but they are intriguingly well meshed. The association of Arthur with Wordsworth is given credence by Coleridge himself in a letter of July 1800 to Humphrey Davy, then proof-reading *Lyrical Ballads* 1800.

> W. Wordsworth is such a lazy fellow that I bemire myself by making promises for him… I trust however that I have invoked the sleeping Bard with a spell so potent, that he will awake and deliver up that sword of Argantyr, which is to rive the enchanter GAUDYVERSE from his crown to his chops. (*CL* I 611)

The Knights of the Round Table, most of them bards it seems, all appear to have deserted Arthur, apart from Tristram and Scout, at the point when he needs them most, his rescue of Guinevere from her father. Arthur receives news of the intended rape from his beloved on two tablets desperately pleading for him to return to her. Rowenna, with equally desperate pleas attempts to dissuade him, offering Arthur fame, empire and glory if he rejects the already polluted Guinevere. Made desperate himself (all seems desperate in this play), Arthur vows to attempt a rescue. We know from the letters of Annette Vallon, the French mother of Wordsworth's child, that her pleas to Wordsworth were

just such impassioned calls for his return, and that Dorothy Wordsworth was a mediator and sympathiser with her both in writing letters and in accompanying Wordsworth to France in 1802. She was also more than once, especially during their time in Germany, thought to be Wordsworth's mistress herself. When Wordsworth set off for Germany in 1798 with Chester, Coleridge and Dorothy, his last visit was to Thelwall and the expedition has produced much speculation about what transpired there.[8]

As Arthur realises when he finds that Tristram, ('the last of all my host' as he calls him) has disappeared, dragged off stage by the 'oafish'[9] Incubus at the behest of his would be seductress Rowenna, wife of Vortigern, (or should it be Gaudyverse?) he cannot succeed without the 'help of a friend'; supernatural power. Lamenting when he is within the vicinity of Rowenna's Gothic castle, set in in Wales, that this is not the place where he was reared by the chaster spirits of the groves, Arthur is indeed left isolated in a forest of enchantment.

The devil Incubus, Dryden's frozen Genius of English poetry, is enlisted to entrap Tristram to get him out of the reach of Arthur's sword and he hits on the idea of using 'cwrw', the welsh word for ale.[10] Incubus is met by Agga, who questions him on why he has been sent to the frozen regions. He serves Rowenna, the Northern sorceress, so one might say she is his muse, if not the power behind his supernatural work and spells. If Incubus is read as a figure for the subconscious erotic desire of dreams, he has his counter-part in Geraldine in Coleridge's *Christabel*, a female succubus whose power is both desired, feared, open to abuse and misunderstood. His influence in the play is ultimately beneficent though, and he is a necessarily seductive, if shape-shifting, spirit.

Though Incubus describes himself as unattractive to women, he is capable of putting them under a spell and in his song he declares that he will regenerate himself at the turn of the century (1800) in the spirit of the love song and will conquer all maidens thereby. Thelwall's later report to his own wife that on meeting Sara Coleridge, she seemed to have learned to hold her tongue better,[11] means there may be something of Sara in the speech below. We should recognise a familiar Coleridgean exclamation here:

> *Incub.* (Shaking the snow from his sides.) Whu-u-u-u!.
>
> What's the business pr'ythee now?
>
> *Agga.* Son of Frost! You know I trow.

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[8] See Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, (London: Pimlico Edition, 2000)

[9] Coleridge describes himself as having an 'ideotic' face in a letter to Thelwall of 1796. (CL I 259). His letters of 1800 constantly refer to his appearance when he was ill as a very devil personified.

[10] Alan Liu connects Wordsworth's tale of his encounter with a Welsh parson who attacked him with a knife after drinking too much 'cwrw' with the Saxon Hengist's 'night of the long knives'. I am inclined to connect it with this play. Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) 575-576

[11] Cited in E. P Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*, (New York: The New Press, 1997) 187

> Did you not your mistress hear?
>
> *Incub.* Hear? O yes; there's no fear of that.—I assure you. When tis a woman we serve, our orders are sufficiently audible! The frosts of Hela cannot plug up one's ears against the *clear* tones of the feminine organ.

He has been confined to the frozen regions since he failed to agree with the gods on the subject of war.

> *Incub.*… Our fisticuff divinities and I happened not to set up our horses together on the subject of the exquisite delight of being hacked and hewed into a thousand pieces. Not that I could be valiant in my own way: for my mouth was full of big oaths, and my brow seemed as dark with danger as a thunder-cloud; till a disastrous coincidence took the sword of my renown out of my mouth and placed it in my hand.
>
> *Ag.* Ha! Ha! Poor Incubus! And then I suppose it was perfectly out of its element.
>
> *Inc.* In short, the signal for battle was given; when suddenly a cold sweat coming over me, I slunk from the ranks; hid myself in a house of conveniency; died of apprehension, before the conflict was decided; was conveyed immediately to the realms of Mist and Frost, and hung up for an icicle upon the eaves of Hela's palace; where I might ruefully have remained… without remission or intermission, hope or holiday, the whole predestined period of my purgation.—

The scene echoes with allusions to Coleridge's poetry, *Frost At Midnight* particularly, and the secret ministry of fear which has silenced the bards who gathered at the round table. It also resounds, as does the whole play, with resonances of Coleridge's *Religious Musings*[12] But this is meant to be a comic scene, and Incubus also tells us that he will suffer a curious punishment. Having been at first freezing in hell, after a short time he is suffering the most atrocious burning pains in his joints.

> *Incu.* Who-o-o—o! What a poor undone devil am I!... A precious cataplasm will be fixed to my fores, I'll warrant, if I descend to Nissheim again with an imperfect account of my mission.[13]

Lying with a plaister fixed to his fores, 'lamed by the scathe of fire', was the condition that Coleridge was actually in when Thelwall visited Stowey, after Sara had accidentally spilt boiling milk on him.[14] Nissheim is the hell he has

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[12] See Judith Thompson, *'An Autumnal Blast'*, *Studies in Romanticism, 36, (1997*) 427-56 for an account of Thelwall and Coleridge's intertextual conversations at this time.

[13] Ibid 34

[14] PW II i 481

been living in. We might well imagine what Sara's response might have been had she read it. When Incubus sings that he will be regenerated at the turn of the eighteenth century when 'the fates to this world shall my essence restore,/ To shudder in regions of Hela no more' and 'nakedness self be the tip of the mode' he might well be touching on Coleridge's poetry of 1800, *Christabel* and and the half naked Geraldine. Incubus revels in this, his protean ability.

Incubus is by far the most complex character in this more than obscure play. Most of the other characters are, however, underdeveloped. Scout has little function in the plot except to inform Guinevere of the rescue plan, and is probably meant to be Chester, but at the end of the play Tristram refers to him as, 'my little amphibious' a reference perhaps to the depiction of Lamb and Lloyd as a frog and toad in the Gillray cartoon *The New Morality*. When Thelwall wrote to Susan after visiting Keswick on his way to the fated Edinburgh lecture in 1803, he described Sara as grown less talkative 'at least less obvious' and Southey himself 'croaks' rather than speaks. Mrs Southey's 'only expression is vanity and she seems a mere mute in the drama'.[15] Tristram calls Scout a water drinker,[16] a 'well hunter' who advocates temperance rather than drinking 'valiant CWRW'. Tristram is able to begin the rescue of Guinevere by telling Vortigern's ministers they have deserted the ranks, (as well as his wife and children, according to the Anti Jacobin magazine when he left for Germany) and having given some sort of recantation: 'our tale of desertion passes muster'. He manages this feat only after having been taken in by or inspired by Incubus, his Germanic daemon, lured into this by 'valiant CWRW' thereby infiltrating Vortigern's castle as a kind of spy or fifth columnist. Without *The Ancient Mariner*, *Love*, and Coleridge's supernatural poems, Wordsworth might have had less success in rescuing English poetry from the clutches of German excess.

Thelwall's letter to Dr. Crompton of 1798 is most intent, though, on letting him know that Coleridge has received, not a legacy, as Wordsworth had, but a gift from the Wedgwoods.[17] And at this point I think we should examine just what valiant C-W-R-W might be.

When Incubus finds Arthur and Tristram, Tristram is already drunk, rolling around the stage carrying an empty keg. The keg is 'light' and 'empty' and I believe, for no other reason than that it sounds very like Cottle – it is called here a 'costrel', an obsolete name for a barrel. 'Oh, my costrel!—my sweet, lovely—poor, miserable, empty costrel!' moans Tristram. This costrel is, sadly, drained dry, ever to be a butt of others people jokes thereafter.

In this reading Thelwall presents Joseph Cottle as unreliable, perhaps even culpable, in selling his publishing business, thereby drying up a source of support for the poets he published. Cottle was a Baptist and the following may

[15] Quoted in E. P. Thompson. *The Romantics. England in a Revolutionary Age* (The New Press. New York:1997) 187

[16] Thelwall tells us that he is a water drinker himself in his memoir. In the Preface of 1815, Wordsworth makes his peace also with his former friends and gives the poetry of Fancy its due by quoting the drinking song from Cotton's Ode Upon Winter. He also tells us that he is a 'water drinker himself'.

[17] Thelwall was making a point that he has not received the privileges Coleridge has..

well be one of those typical sneers at religion which Wordsworth and Coleridge did not admire in Thelwall.

> *Tristram* (*turning up his cag.*) Spirits! O, yes your honours highness!—our spirits are all gone; that's certain. Here it is your honour's highness! Round and sleek!— Just the same big belly it set out with. But it's delivered your honour's highness! Fairly delivered; and there's an end to our deliverance.
>
> Hollow! hollow! (*knocking against it with his knuckles*)—Hollow as a false friend, who preaches and moralises when Necessity is at the door; and then he rings, just like this—all his swelling words being nothing but emptiness![18]

In his *Reminiscences of Southey and Coleridge* Cottle goes to great lengths to show just how much he did support them in their early days in Bristol, and his defensiveness may stem from this cruel but ill targeted satire.

But CWRW; what of that? Tristram's song makes it clear that CWRW is in fact an alternative source of support. A large cask rises out of the ground:

> Bawh! What have we here? Ho! ho! A cask! A cask.—The prayers of the drunken shall be heard; for they pray in The Spirit. But what is this? Some magical inscription I suppose. O thou universal lamplightress, —thou that see'st many a thing that thy elder brother, the sun, never dreamt of!—lend me thy spectacles awhile, that I may spell. C—W—R—W? Cwrw!! Spell, indeed—(*Sings…*)
>
> Bravo! bravo little Tristram! One draft of this genuine water of the muses and thou wilt eclipse all the Knights of the Round Table, and bear away the prize, in the bardic circles, from Taliessin himself.[19]

Does Thelwall mean the letters to represent the initials of four of his own probable subscribers, the two Wedgwoods, and William Roscoe and Peter Crompton who both knew Coleridge and Thelwall in the Liverpool circle and had offered Coleridge financial support, or could the R and C be read as the initials of Raisley Calvert, Wordsworth's benefactor? Since Tristram is the only one to drink from the cask, probably not.[20] But it could be interpreted that way, by Wordsworth perhaps, and might well have been, judging by the series of sonnets he wrote in 1802-3 which touch on many of the issues raised in the play and includes a sonnet in honour of Calvert. Wordsworth's sonnets of this period deserve closer scrutiny in light of this possible connection. In the poems on the naming of places Wordsworth had also been given the mountain Stone Arthur as his particular place by Dorothy. All this is certainly intriguing.

None-the-less, there is a devil in the cask for Tristram in the form of

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[18] Ibid 34

[19] Ibid 39-41

[20] Tristram repeats the cryptic C-W-R-W through several verses of his 'song about ale' giving more than enough emphasis to the letters.

Saxon or Germanic influences, Incubus' latest manifestation, and in the play it spirits him away, complaining that he freezes as he is dragged off to the castle where he appears in fine Falstaffian form disputing with the philosophical and metaphysical masters of the banquet of Saxon delights he is about to consume. In a spirited song, he contrasts the banquet with the kind of humble thatched cottage fayre of turnips 'or a good welsh leek' which he declares he prefers to being hacked and hewed in Valhalla. *Lines Written near Bridgewater* mentions the plain food and home brewed ale that Thelwall and Coleridge might have shared had their dream of philosophic retreat come to fruition.

The time spent in Germany by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy included a freezing Winter, and the money from the Wedgwood brothers supported them both. Cottle may have published *Lyrical Ballads*, but during that period his money did run out and the two poets were also separated in Germany, for a while allaying Poole's fears of 'amalgamation' and the loss of Coleridge's distinctive poetic and religious affinities. Coleridge's letters were made freely available to his Bristol friends, especially by Poole and Sara Coleridge, as most letters were at that time. If Thelwall did believe that Coleridge was somehow involved in a secret expedition at this time, he presents it to the public as having more to do with rescuing a maiden in distress by way of the intervention of a mistress who makes it possible for the hero to marry his beloved. Wordsworth later refuted any suggestion that he was a 'lover and did woo' or 'far worse', for 'Verse was what he had been wedded to'.[21] If the play can be misread its ambiguities are teasingly provocative.

Thelwall's note on the character of the Fairy of the Lake is pertinent here:

> In delineating her character I should perhaps have been justified by the record in representing her in a very different point of view. It is no improbable conjecture that the fable originated in the mysterious seclusion of some beautiful mistress of the British Champion; and that Arthur (like the more fortunate Numa) had the art to derive the credit of sanctity from the indulgence of an illicit amour. She was however considered by the ancient Cambrians as a benignant Spirit – a guardian of the just and holy cause; and with these ideas modern morality cannot reconcile the supposition of an amorous connection[22]

Coleridge's concern for the Wedgwoods after April 1802 when Wordsworth sent him 'Thel's book' asking him curtly 'tell me something about it'[23] is apparent in his writing to them to assure them he has not been indolent and is truly grateful for their financial support. But, above all, in April 1802 Coleridge is most dejected, and in October publicises his state of mind in *Dejection: An Ode* in the Morning Post on the day of Wordsworth's wedding to Mary

21 *'Within our happy Castle there dwelt one'*. Coleridge in this poem is given 'A face divine of heaven-born ideotcy!'.
22 Ibid 207. It is worth noting the use of the French here.
23 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, (2nd Ed, Oxford,1967) 349

Hutchinson. The storm which is presaged at the beginning of *Dejection* is noisy, loud and threatening, telling of the 'Rushing of an Host in Rout' and Coleridge hopes it will be merely of 'a mountain birth'. But he laments more than anything the loss of his 'shaping spirit of imagination' and his mirth.

The final quotations in this paper I give to two of Coleridge's many translated epigrams from the Morning Post of September and October 1802, which included the puzzling 'Spots in the Sun' about the courtesan Annette whose spiritual 'father' is reputed to have been one of her lovers, and the epigram on a masculine moon and a feminine sun, Germanic forms which Thelwall refers to in his notes to the play.[24] It is suggested that the EPIGRAM TO ONE WHO HAD PUBLISHED IN PRINT WHAT HAD BEEN ENTRUSTED TO HIM BY MY FIRESIDE alludes to Lloyd's *Edmund Oliver*, but 1802 was the year of Thelwall's Fairy for Wordsworth and Coleridge.

> Two things hast thou made known to half the nation,
> My secrets, and my want of penetration:
> For O! far more than all, which thou hast penn'd
> It shames me to have called a wretch like thee, my friend[25]

The cryptic allusion below points, on the surface at least, to Thelwall, as a man who had repaid Wordsworth's support with opportunism which misfired.

> A poor benighted Pedlar knock'd
> One night at SELL-ALL'S door,
> The same who saved old SELL-ALL's life
> 'Twas but the year before!
> And SELL-ALL rose and let him in,
> Not utterly unwilling
> But first he bargained with the man,
> And took his only shilling!
> That night he dreamt he'd given away his pelf,
> Walked in his sleep, and sleeping hung himself! (PW 327)

E P Thompson closes his account of Thelwall's career by accusing Wordsworth and Coleridge of administering the 'kill' to the Jacobin fox. I think Thompson is nearer the mark in saying Thelwall committed literary suicide in his pamphlet war with Jeffrey. Only when Wordsworth was reviewed himself by Jeffrey did he suffer the consequence of the alliance. Wordsworth's battle to renew English poetry, though, had another casualty in the loss of Coleridge's specifically supernatural and pre-eminently mirthful poetic Genius.

[24] Could Annette Vallon's Welsh uncles, both of them priests, have any bearing on this strange epigram?
[25] PW I 2 730/31