“In Cælibe Toro meo”: Coleridge’s “old sofa, half bed” at Greta Hall

Paul Cheshire

After noting the stunning panoramic lakeland views through the two windows of Coleridge’s Greta Hall study, Charles Lamb memorably conveyed the eccentric character of this “large antique ill-shaped room” by listing a selection of its contents: an organ “big enough for a church”, an aeolian harp, and an “old sofa, half bed”.¹ My brief note here concerns Coleridge’s Latin expression for this last piece of furniture, which features in his notebook entry (CN I 1718) of December 1803.

When in a state of pleasurable & balmy Quietness I feel my Cheek and Temple on the nicely made up Pillow in Cælibe Toro meo, the fire-gleam on my dear Books, that fill up one whole side from ceiling to floor of my Tall Study—& winds, perhaps are driving the rain, or whistling in frost, at my blessed Window, whence I see Borrodale, the Lake, Newlands—wood, water, mountains, omniform Beauty—O then as I first sink on the pillow, as if Sleep had indeed a material realm, as if when I sank on my pillow, I was entering that region & realized Faery Land of Sleep—O then what visions have I had, what dreams—the Bark, the Sea, the all the shapes & sounds & adventures made up of the Stuff of Sleep & Dreams, & yet my Reason at the Rudder/O what visions, <μαστος> as if my Cheek & Temple were lying on me gale o’ mast on—Seele meines Lebens!—& I sink down the waters, thro’ Seas & Seas—yet warm, yet a Spirit—/Pillow = mast high <οι>.

Kathleen Coburn’s translation of “Cælibe Toro meo” as “on my celibate couch” can steer the reader in the wrong direction. Cælebs means unmarried, widowed or divorced. Torus is a word of many applications, which applied to a bed, refers to a place of sexual union. (Torus 5, Oxford Latin Dictionary, ed P.G.W.Glare). The expression caelebs torus (nominative of caelibe toro), can be found in Seneca’s Agamemnon, where it carries a clear connotation of extramarital sexual activity. In Seneca’s play Clytemnestra jealously complains that her husband Agamemnon, away at Troy, always has a barbarian mistress in his caelebs torus (Line 185). Coleridge’s study bed, as this notebook entry makes abundantly clear, offers him just such opportunities in his fantasy world. A recent editor of Seneca’s play notes caelebs torus and offers two other usages, but neither of these combine torus and caelebs.² This link to Seneca is strengthened by the knowledge that Coleridge was reading his tragedies at Greta Hall during this period. In January 1801 he was reading Thyestes (CN I 884), and in September 1803 Troades (CN I 1507).

I have amended the layout of Coburn’s published transcription of the bottom line of this notebook entry. Coburn’s text placed “Pillow = mast high” a line below its true position as if Coleridge intended it as a footnote. “Pillow...” should be a direct continuation of “Spirit—/”. Coburn did this to ensure that <οι> appeared directly above “high” as written by Coleridge on the page, but this is contrary to her usual editorial practice.

To make this a comprehensive note on Coleridge’s passage, for those who don’t have Coburn’s volume to hand, I will add her glosses here:

- **me gale o’ mast on**: large breasted (phonetic from the Greek megalomaston)
- **Seele meines Lebens**: soul of my life (German).
- **μαστοί; mast high <οι>**: mastoi = breasts (Greek).

As well as serving as an anglicised pun on the Greek for breasts, regardless of whether having a mega “mast on” was a bawdy colloquial expression in Coleridge’s day, the “mast high” at the end surely indicates the raising of his genital mainsail.

Coleridge seems to be describing a habitual experience of sinking into an erotically charged opium reverie. This entire passage provides a very useful background to his poem ‘The Daydream’ where he is lying on a couch dreaming of being kissed by Sara Hutchinson, and is then interrupted from his erotic reverie by little Hartley creeping onto his bed like a boy from Porlock (PW II 1 702-3). Mays’ headnote suggests that this poem is based on a memory of a real kissing incident at Gallow Hill. It seems likely that such memories were treasured, and regularly re-enacted as Asra fantasies, in Coleridge’s *Caelibe Toro* at Greta Hall.