

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 29 (NS) Summer 2007

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<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

“Daubed Landscapes”: Coleridge and Dramatic Illusion

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THE DEVELOPMENT of Coleridge’s important theory of aesthetic illusion has been expertly traced by Frederick Burwick in his book on *Illusion and the Drama* from its beginnings in annotations to Richard Payne Knight’s *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (3rd edition, 1806) to the lectures he delivered in 1818-19, and there is bound to be some overlap in the following discussion. However, I want to focus on a very specific question which has not had so much attention, namely why, noting that “The Subject of Stage-Illusion is so important” (LL I 135), Coleridge felt it necessary to preface his criticism of Shakespeare’s plays in his first course of lectures in 1808, and again in 1811, by working out for his audience a definition of dramatic illusion. Why should he do this in view of what many commentators have observed, that Coleridge had little respect for performance of the plays on the stage and argued that they were best read “in the closet”? Shakespeare, he declared,

found the stage as near as possible a closet, & and in the closet only could it be fully and completely enjoyed. He asserted that those who went to the theatre in our own day, when any of our poet’s works were represented, went to see *M^r Kemble* in *Macbeth*, or *M^s Siddons’ Isabel*, to hear speeches usurped by fellows who owed their very elevation to dexterity in snuffing candles since all the inferior characters, thro’ w^{ch} our poet shone no less conspicuously & brightly, were given them to deliver (LL I 254).

These notes, taken down at the lecture by a listener, may not be an accurate record of what Coleridge said, but they confirm what has often been assumed as his attitude to theatres in which only the star actors mattered, and the audience went to attend to them, not to the play as a whole. If Shakespeare could have seen a play in the theatres of the 1800s he would, says Coleridge, “the first moment have felt the shifting of the scenes”; he would have found “much to please the senses in performance” and “much to offend them in the play.” (LL I 228-9)

What did he mean by this? He was arguing that Shakespeare appealed to the imagination rather than to the senses, and cited the Prologue to *Henry V*:

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O pardon! Since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million,
And let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.

There were curtains on the Elizabethan stage, but no scenery, as Coleridge

thought, hence Shakespeare invites us to use our imagination. By contrast, at the two patent theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, in Coleridge’s time every production sought to “make everything appear reality” by the use of ever more elaborate scenic effects. He deplored this attempt to deceive the audience, and repeatedly emphasized the importance of distinguishing between an imitation and a copy, claiming that “The end of dramatic Poetry is not to present a copy, but an *imitation* of real life”. Our pleasure in drama, as in poetry and painting, derives, he believed, from our simultaneous consciousness of similarity and difference. According to Coleridge Shakespeare created his characters from meditation, and did not copy them from life, rebutting Dr Johnson’s claim that the dramatist “whether life or nature be his subject, shows plainly that he has seen with his own eyes; he gives the image which he receives”, holding up “to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life”.¹ Coleridge argued that Shakespeare should be thought of as a dramatist of imagination, not a copyist from life.

It is valid, but misleading, to conclude simply that Coleridge scorned the theatres of his age. Although he was contemptuous of some of its features, he was fascinated by the stage, and the issue is much more complicated in relation to his own numerous attempts at writing plays. In 1797 he had Kemble and Mrs Siddons in mind when working on *Osorio*, “something romantic & wild & terrible” (CL I 318) at a time when he was reviewing Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* and other Gothic novels. He was given to understand in February 1797 (CL I 304), that R.B. Sheridan, the principal proprietor of the playhouse, had wanted him to write a play for Drury Lane, and in due course *Osorio A Tragedy* was submitted and turned down. Coleridge may not have been surprised, for in October he wrote that he was disgusted with the play. In 1800 he was in London, devoting his evenings to the theatres he said, (CL I 559) in order to write a series of essays on the drama and present state of the theatres for the *Morning Post*. The essays never materialized. But knowing that a tragedy was unlikely to succeed (“What tragedy has in 15 years?” CL I 653) did not deter him; and in spite of his contempt for Sheridan’s *Pizarro*, a tragedy in a kind of lilting prose, in five acts, on the Spanish invasion of Peru in the time of the Incas, which was a huge success at Drury Lane in 1799, Coleridge never lost interest in the project of writing a tragedy for this theatre. In the end he was the only poet of his generation to succeed, with *Remorse* in 1813, which ran for twenty performances.

Shakespeare and Fletcher remained the models for tragedy, so that authors continued to think in terms of a five-act structure and blank verse. Only the two theatres at Drury Lane and Covent Garden retained the royal patent that gave them sole authority to stage plays. The population of London was increasing rapidly, however, so that a number of other theatres sprang up to stage shows, spectacles, and what were called burlettas, consisting of recitative

¹ Samuel Johnson, “Preface to Shakespeare” in Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare ed. Henry Woudhuysen (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 145, 122.

and songs with musical accompaniment. The two patent theatres responded to the growth of London by expanding. Drury Lane, with an audience capacity of 2300, was demolished in 1791, and replaced by a new theatre with a capacity of about 3600, making it the largest theatre in Europe.² Covent Garden also was refurbished in 1792 with a capacity increased from 2170 to more than 3000. Coleridge enjoyed going to see performances, and in a letter to his old friend, the comic actor Charles Matthews, referred to himself as "an old Stager" (CL IV 940), but he also commented at various times on the deficiencies of these theatres. He thought, for example, that Drury Lane was much too large and cavernous, and actors' voices were not easily heard; he deplored the star system; and "in the glare of the scenes, with every wished-for object industriously realized, the mind becomes bewildered in surrounding attractions" (LL I 564). He became bitter, too, about the way Drury Lane was run from 1812, when a committee of non-professionals, not one with theatre experience (Sheridan being excluded from the group) was established by the proprietors to manage it. Coleridge always yielded to the better judgment of professionals when negotiating about his own plays, acknowledging his debt in his Preface to *Remorse* as published, and accepting their cuts in and alterations made when it was staged (PW III 2 1038, 1066-7).

Much more important for Coleridge as a practising dramatist and critic of Shakespeare were the great technological changes in staging developed in the late eighteenth century, and especially after the arrival of Philip de Louthembourg, brought over from Paris by David Garrick in 1771 to work at Drury Lane. The design of the patent houses had remained conservative during most of the eighteenth century. Plays were commonly acted out mainly on a forestage extending in front of the proscenium arch, with a door on each side at the arch and tiers of boxes at the side for members of the audience. This design can be seen in a well-known engraving of Covent Garden, designed by Edward Shepherd in 1731-2 [Plate 1]. Here in 1763 at a performance of the opera *Artaxerxes* by Thomas Arne, about a Persian emperor of the fourth century BCE, riots took place in protest against the management's refusal to allow half price concessions.³ The actors are shown on the forestage, two of them in exotic costumes suggesting the Middle East, but others in the dress of the day. The wings representing columns and the backdrop at the rear have nothing to do with the play, and suggest a conventional neo-classical interior that could be ignored by the audience. The proscenium arch is marked by incongruous cut-out female figures on either side. Candelabra hung over the forestage produced a constant light.

By 1777, after a reconstruction of Drury Lane by Robert Adam in 1775, and after the impact of de Louthembourg's arrival, changes were taking place.

² Survey of London, XXXV, General Editor F. H. W. Sheppard (London: Athlone Press, University of London, for the Greater London Council, 1970), 52; see also Charles Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage 1776-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), xliii-xliv.

³ For an account of these so-called "Fitzgiggo riots", see *Restoration and Georgian England 1660-1788*, ed. David Thomas. *Theatre in Europe: a Documentary History* (Cambridge, CUP 1989) 400-03.



Plate 1: Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, 1763, riots during the opera *Artaxerxes* by Thomas Arne
(*Survey of London*, XXXV, general ed. F.H.W. Shepherd, Athlone Press, 1970, Plate 4/c)

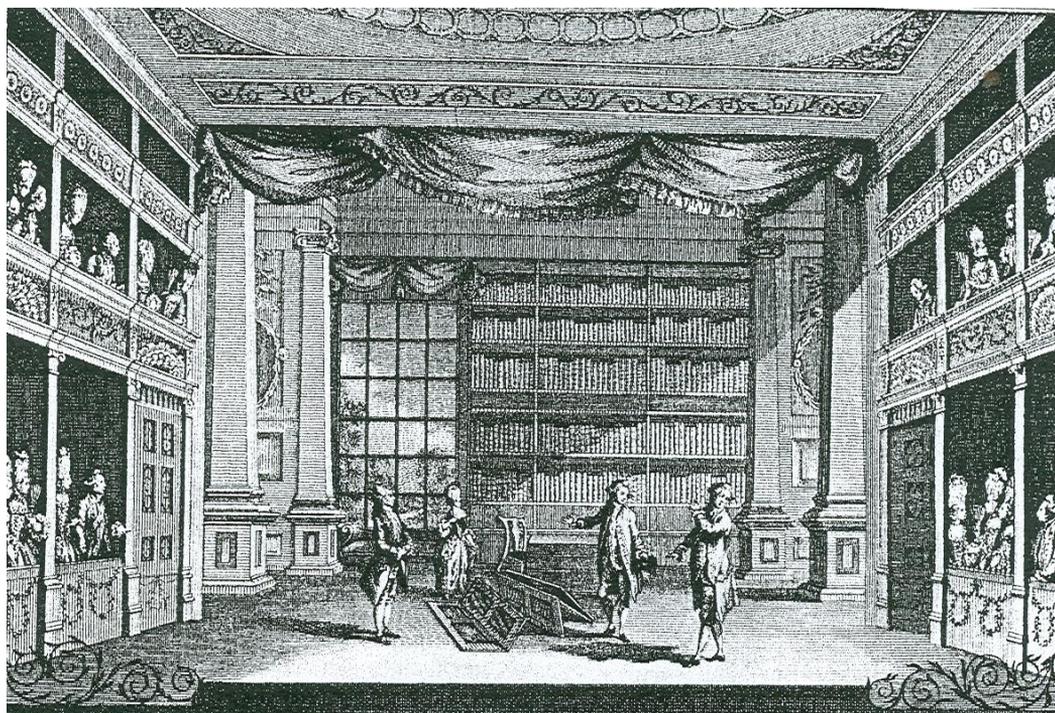


Plate 2: Theatre Royal, Drury Lane as reconstructed by Robert Adam in 1775 – scene from
The School for Scandal (*Survey of London, etc*, Plate 9b)

A print of a performance of the library scene in Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* [Plate 2] shows the actors working on the forestage, with three tiers of side-boxes, to which the many asides could be directed. Parallel wings in grooves gave depth, while a flat painted to look like the wall of a library, closed off the rear of the stage. Candelabra are no longer to be seen, for by this time lights were mounted on standards at the sides of the stage out of sight of the audience, with tin reflectors to increase power, and movable shields that could be drawn across to create a shadow effect such as is shown in the print.

The typical Georgian theatre thus could be described “as a form with a deep forestage, flanked by entrance doors in the proscenium sides, and standing in front of an ‘inner’ stage which was intended primarily as a scenic area, the acting area being mainly confined to the forestage”.⁴ By the late 1770s, however, more radical changes were being introduced that made practicable an ever greater use of spectacle. The forestage gradually retreated, as practical scenery was created behind the proscenium arch to create more naturalistic effects, with ground-rows in separate pieces supported by braces, and gauzes were used on pivoting lights to suggest different qualities of light, such as sunsets, moonlight and clouds. By 1776 De Louthembourg was being praised as “the first artist who showed our theatre directors that by a just disposition of light and shade the eye of the spectator might be so effectually deceived in a playhouse as to take the produce of art for real nature”.⁵ The reporter in the *Morning Chronicle* was hailing the birth of scenic illusion.

To exploit new scenic effects the orientation of the stage in the expanding theatres had to change. Instead of actors being the focus, the settings became more important, and the players retreated behind the proscenium arch as part of the scene. A print illustrating the alterations at Drury Lane made by Henry Holland in 1791-4 [Plate 3] shows the action of a play taking place behind the proscenium. A theatre of the ear gave way to a theatre of the eye, as the forestage shrank, the side boxes were removed and actors had to play to the front of the stage, a change registered in a drawing of Drury Lane in 1813 [Plate 4]. Vast spectacles began to be mounted in the new enormous Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres in this period. At Drury Lane in 1795 was staged a spectacular show called *Alexander the Great* set in the “City of Babylon” with two hundred extras used mainly in processions of slaves, soldiers, musicians, generals on horseback and the like, and culminating in the marriage of Alexander and Statira.⁶ As ever more extravagant spectacles were invented for the unlicensed theatres that developed in the rapidly growing metropolis, the patent theatres were driven to compete. Dancing and singing between the acts of a play developed into productions like *Alexander the Great*, and plays became more dependent on scenic effects, with increasing emphasis on realistic antiquarian detail for historical plays, including those by Shakespeare,

⁴ Richard Southern, *Changeable Scenery* (London: Faber, 1952), 119.

⁵ Sybil Rosenfeld, *A Short History of Scene Design in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 92.

⁶ Charles Beecher Hogan, *The London Stage 1776-1800 A Critical Introduction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), lxxxiv-lxxxv.

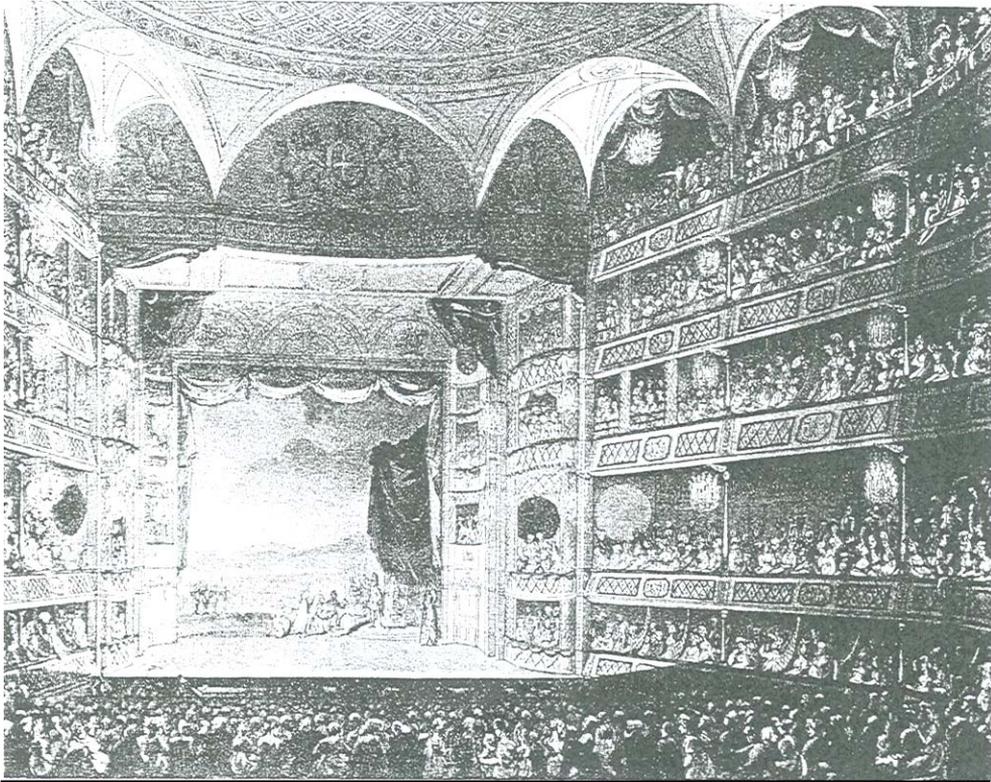


Plate 3: Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, about 1797 – auditorium. (*Survey of London*, etc, Plate 18a)

and on elaborate landscapes and interiors for melodramas and gothic plays.

Gothic drama was given an impetus by Matthew Gregory Lewis with the enormous success of his prose play *The Castle Spectre* at Drury Lane in 1797, set in a medieval world of castles and dungeons, with a threatened heroine, a noble hero and a villain whose character is complicated by remorse for what he has done: “The situation, then, is classically Gothic: in a wild inhospitable setting a hidden event of years past exerts a fateful influence on the present, so allowing an evil force to hold sway over unprotected innocence”.⁷ Historical drama found its greatest appeal in Sheridan’s tragedy *Pizarro*, adapted from the German August von Kotzebue’s play *Die Spanier in Peru, oder Rollas Tod*. Coleridge dismissed this as a “pantomime” (CL 1 653), but as a play about the invasion of Peru under the Incas by Spain, it could be interpreted as patriotic at a time when France might invade England: the Inca warriors declare, “we serve a Monarch whom we love and a God whom we adore”. Also it had elaborate practical scenery for the audience to enjoy. The scenes included pavilions and tents, trees on a rocky eminence, “A wild retreat among stupendous rocks”, a dungeon in a rock; a thick forest; a “dreadful storm”, with thunder and

⁷ Joseph W. Donohue, Jr., *Theatre in the Age of Kean* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 98-9.

lightning; a “romantic recess among the rocks”; and, as a climax, in Act 5, Scene 2, “an outpost of the Spanish camp, wild and rocky background. Torrent falling down a precipice, with bridge formed by a tree”. The hero, Rolla, fleeing the Spanish soldiers, escapes under fire across the tree with a babe in his arms, and tears the tree away from the bank opposite.

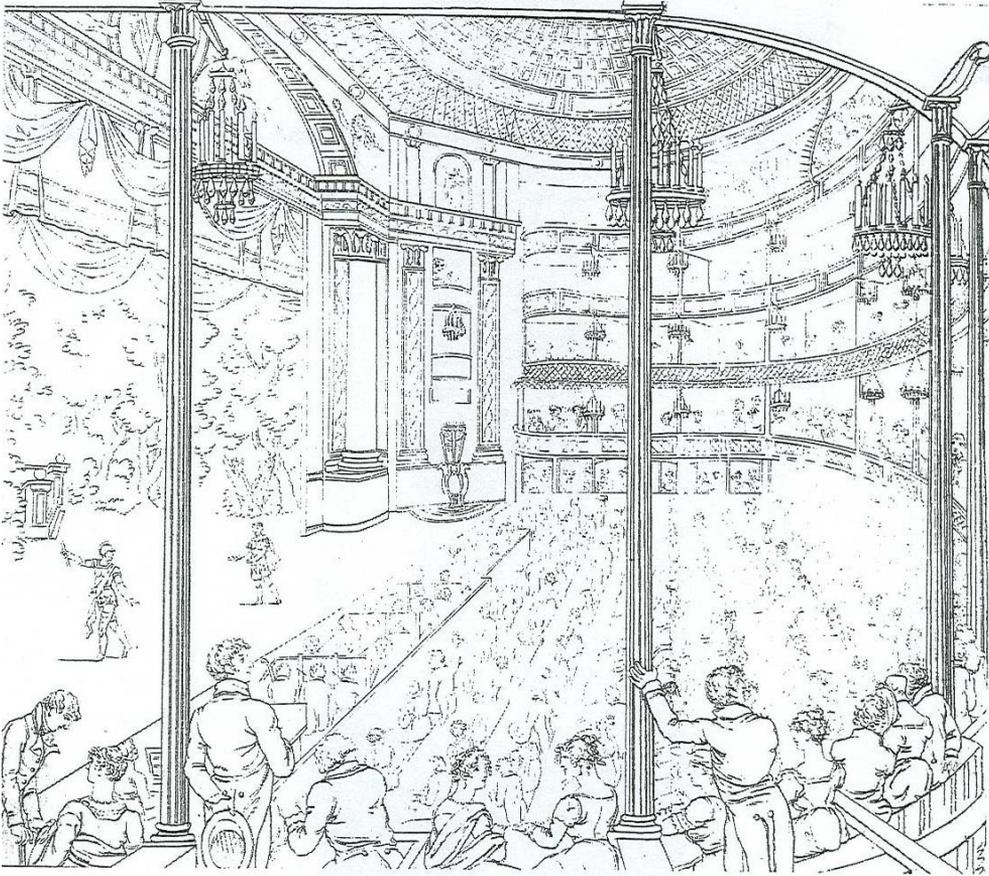


Plate 4: Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, 1813.

Survey of London, etc, Plate 32)

These scenes were the main attraction, and Coleridge was not alone in thinking the play to be both silly and immoral. An anonymous reviewer in a journal called *The Oracle* in 1802 remarked on the “mental disease” afflicting the country:⁸

The first symptoms were a strange admiration of ghosts, mouldering castles, sulphurous flames, bloody daggers, and other terrific images of a distempered imagination. In this stage of the disease it may be denominated the *Spectromania*, but.... The

⁸ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Dramatic Works*, ed. Cecil Price, (2 vols., Oxford University Press, 1973), II.635-7.

dangerous symptoms increased, and it assumed a formidable appearance under the name of... *Kotzebue-mania*.... But this mental malady did not arrive at the greatest height till the introduction of *Pizarro*... [which] had a more pernicious effect on the health and morals of the community than gin.... Indeed, no disease has raged with such fatal malignancy in this capital since the plague in 1665.

This essay wittily attacks the fashion for plays like *The Castle Spectre* and *Pizarro*. Coleridge poured out his accumulated scorn for the first kind in his critique of Charles Maturin’s play *Bertram, or the Castle of St. Aldobrand*, a great success when performed at Drury Lane in 1816, even as Coleridge’s own play, *Zapolya*, intended for the same theatre, was rejected. He mocked the stage effects in *Bertram*, describing the heroine Imogine as wandering “about in dark woods with cavern-rocks and precipices in the back-scene; and a number of mute dramatis personae move in and out continually, for whose presence there is always at least this reason, that they afford something to be seen, by that very large part of a Drury-Lane audience who have small chances of *bearing* a word” (BL II 232). As to Kotzebue’s “pantomimic tragedies and weeping comedies” (BL II 185) Coleridge linked these with the works of Beaumont and Fletcher in contrast to Shakespeare, who, unlike them, “never clothed vice in the garb of virtue”.

At the same time, Coleridge recognized and accepted that to get a tragedy of his own performed at a patent theatre he would have to adapt to the conventions of the age. Like *Pizarro*, *Bertram* has an exotic setting (in Sicily), an action that takes place in a distant past, and a variety of scenes that begin with a shipwreck, and include rocks with a storm at sea, a castle, a Gothic apartment, a wood, castle walls on a dark night, a chapel in a convent, and a cavern with rocks and precipices above. Coleridge’s own *Remorse*, like *Bertram* a tragedy in blank verse and in five acts, is set in the time of Philip II of Spain and deals with the conflict with Moors at that time. It requires typical settings, a Spanish seashore, a “wild and mountainous country”, the inside of a cottage, a courtyard before a castle, a hall of armoury with an altar, the interior of a chapel, and a dark cavern with moonlight and a dungeon. Coleridge seems to have chosen conventional settings that could mostly be supplied from stock, and little was spent on scenery for the production in 1813 (PW III 2 1039). Coleridge was willing to conform to what was expected at Drury Lane, and had enormous respect for the professionals who worked there: as early as 1800 he wrote to William Godwin to say “That actors and managers are often wrong, is true; but still their Trade is their Trade, & the presumption is in favor of their being right” (CL I 636).

I think Coleridge’s strong interest in the stage and attempts to write plays for production at Drury Lane are of great importance in relation to his ideas about drama and especially his Shakespeare criticism. The new technology affecting scenery and lighting led to an ever growing attempt to achieve

pictorial realism on the stage. When John Philip Kemble produced Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* in 1811-12, the staging was set in what appeared to be authentic reproductions of palaces, cathedrals and streets. Scene-painters, in this case William Capon, an architect and designer with antiquarian interests, "who shared Kemble's passion for the medieval and Gothic",⁹ began to be listed in advertisements for performances, since a play might have a dozen changes of scene created by various artists with pictorial realism in mind. Coleridge's concern with the theatre of his time, together with the impact of their growth in size and employment of the latest technology in creating scenic effects, helps to explain the method he chose in his first series of lectures at the Royal Institution in 1808. His topic, as he wrote in a letter to Humphry Davy, was to be the principles of poetry, beginning with "the genius and writings of Shakespeare, relatively to his Predecessors & Contemporaries" (LL I 11). In fact he began in the first lecture to consider the principles of taste in relation to poetry, and went on in Lecture 2 to speak about the origins and development of drama from the ancient Greeks onwards. Then in Lecture 3 he moved from generalities to a close analysis of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, in order to show, as he went on in Lecture 4 to say, that Shakespeare "previously to his Drama—gave proof of a most profound, energetic & philosophical mind" (LL I 82).

At this point the way seemed prepared for launching into a discussion of Shakespeare's plays, but instead Coleridge went on to speak about stage illusion, and to develop, as his incomplete notes indicate, what remains the most subtle theory we have of it. Dr Johnson had famously dismissed the matter in his comment that "the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players."¹⁰ At the other extreme Charles Lamb began his essay entitled "Stage Illusion" by stating as if it were an obvious truth, "A play is said to be well or ill acted in proportion to the scenical illusion produced", thus confusing two different kinds of illusion. He also uses the phrase "dramatic illusion" in this essay, without distinguishing between these various forms of illusion. The confusion in his thinking persisted into the twentieth century.¹¹ Coleridge found it necessary to investigate the nature of dramatic illusion in order to explain why the theatres of his time, with their devotion to scenic illusion, were incapable of staging Shakespeare's plays adequately.

His starting point was the stage scenery of the theatres considered in relation to the art of painting. He was thinking about the difference between a copy and an imitation. The aim of the theatre was, as he saw it, to "imitate reality (Objects, Actions, or Passions) under a *Semblance* of Reality. Thus Claude imitates a Landscape at sunset, but only as a Picture; while a Forest-scene is not presented to the Audience as a Picture, but as a Forest" (LL I 133).

⁹ Sybil Rosenfeld, *Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 37.

¹⁰ Preface to Shakespeare, in Woudhuysen, *Doctor Johnson on Shakespeare*, 135; cited LL I 135.

¹¹ See R. A. Foakes, "Making and Breaking Dramatic Illusion" in *Aesthetic Illusion Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 224-228.

When we look at a work of art “it is a *condition* of all genuine delight” that we should not be deceived, whereas a scenic representation on the stage has as its very purpose “to produce as much Illusion as its nature permits”, even if “in the *full* sense of the word we are no more *deceived* by the one than by the other.” Small children, as Coleridge observed, “are actually deceived by Stage-Scenery” (LL I 134), but he did not assume, as did the reviewer of de Louthembourg’s *The Wonders of Derbyshire* that the spectator could be “so effectually deceived in a playhouse as to take the produce of art for real nature”, even if this was the designer’s aim. Coleridge wished to sharpen a distinction between on the one hand stage scenery designed to represent a cave or rocks or trees or old buildings as accurately as possible in order to deceive as much as possible by the illusion of reality, and on the other hand a painting of a scene by a great artist, which gives pleasure through our awareness of the difference between it and nature—in other words, by our consciousness of its artistry.

This principle Coleridge extended to drama: “The end of dramatic Poetry is not to present a copy, but an *imitation* of real life. Copy is imperfect if the resemblance be not, in every circumstance, exact; but an imitation essentially implies some difference (LL II 277). This distinction was for Coleridge crucial, for it helped to explain the role of the imagination in responding to art, and it enabled him to refute the claim of eighteenth century critics who thought of Shakespeare as copying characters from life in his plays or holding a mirror up to life. His experience in the theatre led Coleridge to reject the notion of Shakespeare as the poet of nature and observation, and to associate him above all with the imagination. This is why he argued, according to the report by John Payne Collier of Lecture 3 in the 1811-12 series, as follows:

It was natural that Shakespear should avail himself of all that imagination afforded. If he had lived in the present day & had seen one of his plays represented he would the first moment have felt the shifting of the scenes—Now, there is so much to please the senses in the performance & so much to offend them in the play, that he would have constructed them on a different model—“We are grateful”, said Coleridge, “that he did not—since there can be no comparative pleasure between having a great man in our closet & on the stage. All may be delighted that Shakespear did not anticipate, & write his plays with any conception of that strong excitement of the senses, that inward endeavour to make everything appear reality which is deemed excellent as to the effort of the present day.”

Shakespeare spoke “not to the sense, as was now done, but to the mind”. (Collier’s notes, LL I 254), and on the modern stage, “in the glare of the scenes, with every wished-for object industriously realized, the mind becomes bewildered in surrounding attractions, whereas Shakespeare, in place of ranting, music and outward action, addresses us in words that enchain the mind, and carry on the attention from scene to scene” (LL I 564)

For Coleridge the greatness of Shakespeare could not be appreciated at Drury Lane, and Coleridge's preference for Shakespeare in the closet is thus related directly to the shift he experienced as a young man towards the end of the eighteenth century from a theatre of the ear on the London stage to a theatre of the eye, of sensation and scenery. He needed, however, some further distinctions in order to explain the nature of illusion in the drama. Scenery might be intended to deceive the eye of the spectator, but only children as a rule were taken in by it. What Lamb called “scenical illusion” might be aimed for but not completely created on stage, where the spectator was likely to notice the wear and tear of the “daubed landscapes on the worm-eaten canvas” (LL I 543). This kind of scenic illusion was irrelevant to an appreciation of Shakespeare, which demanded an understanding of illusion as taking place in the mind, not on the stage but as an “inward illusion” that might make up for the defects of stage performance. Hence for Coleridge all “Stage Presentations, are to produce a sort of temporary half-faith, which the spectator encourages in himself & supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is” (LL1 134). Many earlier critics, German and English, influenced Coleridge in his thinking about illusion, (I.134 n.),¹² but a crucial difference in his conception of stage or dramatic illusion lay in shifting the location of the illusion from the stage (the illusion of a realistic location or the illusion of the actor as being in a different world or historical period from the spectator) and conceiving it as an activity of the mind or imagination on the part of the reader or spectator.

On several occasions when Coleridge returned in his lectures on drama to the topic of illusion he connected the experience of seeing a play with dreaming. In a letter of 1816 he wrote, “The truth is, that Images and Thoughts possess a power in and of themselves, independent of that act of Judgment or Understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them. Such is the ordinary state of mind in dreams” (CL IV 641). In dreaming we neither believe nor disbelieve because our powers of comparison are suspended and no judgment is involved. Deploring as he did the scenic displays of Drury Lane, and the stimulation of the senses there, Coleridge nonetheless understood the power of shifting scenes, and the way an adult may retain something of a child's sensibility, so that through the strength of what he calls “inward illusion” he may make up imaginatively for the deficiencies of the stage—being aware of the artifice, but at the same time yielding to the illusion. Only in the case of an adult this “sort of negative Belief” is assisted by the will. This idea formed the basis of Coleridge's theory, but did not account for the effect of Shakespeare's plays, written for a stage lacking scenery. In a further refinement he clarified the role of the will:

In sleep we pass at once by a sudden collapse into this suspension of

¹² See Burwick, *Illusion and the Drama*, especially Chapter 5, also LL I lv-lvii and 134n.

Will and the Comparative power: whereas in an interesting Play, read or represented, we are brought up to this point, as far as it is requisite or desirable gradually, by the Art of the Poet and the Actors, and with the consent and positive Aidance of our own will. We chuse to be deceived (LL II 266).¹³

“We choose to be deceived”—here Coleridge adds the necessary qualification to his theory that helps to explain how illusion works in seeing and in reading Shakespeare’s plays, whether shown mangled and as vehicles for star actors on the stage or read in the study. Whatever tends to prevent the mind from engaging with “willing Illusion”, whatever forces itself on the attention of the auditors in the theatre as improbable, must be a defect. Implicitly, then, Coleridge still has in mind the superiority of reading to performance in relation to Shakespeare, in whose plays (the remarks quoted were designed as in introduction to a lecture on *The Tempest*), the characters, the unity of interest, appropriateness of style, together with the “charm of language and sentiment” all contribute to and support the illusion.

The idea that we may through an act of will voluntarily yield to a temporary illusion while knowing that we can snap out of it at any moment was given its most brilliant formulation in Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge was writing with reference to the plan of *Lyrical Ballads*, and specifically his contribution in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” but the formulation stems from his thinking about drama:

It was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to 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)

The phrase “shadows of imagination” echoes the words of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, referring to the performance of the actors in the play within the play: “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them”. (5 1 205). The willed suspension of disbelief enables the imagination to work, and it is to the imagination that Shakespeare appeals. Hence Coleridge found it necessary to reject the idea that Shakespeare’s characters were drawn directly from nature, and to argue that he created them from meditation. If Shakespeare seems able to enter “easily into very condition of human nature”, as William Richardson said in his study of some of four major characters (1774), collected in 1812 (cited LL I 69n), it is not because “he changes himself into every character” and, as it were, creates a copy. Coleridge insisted that while Shakespeare has this power so that the characters have their own individuality, nevertheless we always feel the

¹³ See also CL IV641 and Burwick, *Illusion and the Drama*, 212-17.

presence of their creator, and are always aware of Shakespeare, of the power of the artist: "whatever forms they assumed, they were still Shakespeare, or the creatures of his meditation", not of "mere observation" (Collier's notes, Lect 6, 1811-2, LL I 289).

We choose to be deceived, whether it is in the pleasure we take in what we see enacted on the stage and in scenic effects, or in bringing a play of Shakespeare to life in the imagination as we read it. The only "rule" Coleridge was concerned to establish related to stage effects, to whatever might interfere with dramatic illusion, "this state in which the Images have a negative reality", that forces "itself on the Auditors' minds as improbable" (LL.II 266). The nature of dramatic illusion was for Coleridge inward, an activity of the mind; scenic illusion is what the painter or creator of stage effects may aim at but can never fully achieve. Did Coleridge realize the implications of this radical conception, which has not been superseded, and often not even understood? I think not. For in considering Shakespeare's plays he felt he had to discredit two common assertions of eighteenth-century critics, one that Shakespeare was a kind of wild genius, "deficient in just taste and altogether unassisted by knowledge and art";¹⁴ the other that his plays should be judged by external rules of art, the unities, or by the concept of regularity, which had led Dr Johnson to argue that if *Othello* had begun in Cyprus at Act 2, and "the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity" (LL II 316n). Coleridge borrowed from A.W.von Schlegel a concept of organic unity to oppose to mechanical rules: "The organic form... is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form" (LL I 495). He likened Shakespeare's plays to trees, each growing into its own shape and different from other trees of its own kind, though "every man was able to decide at first sight which was an ash or a poplar" (LL.I 358).

This analogy was used by Coleridge to explain the difference between "what he called mechanic and organic regularity", according to John Payne Collier's notes of Lecture 9 in the 1811-12 series. Mechanic regularity is found in a copy, whereas in organic form, "there is a law which all the parts obey conforming themselves to the outward symbols & manifestations of the essential principle" (LL.I 358). This, it would seem, is what enables us to recognize a tree as a poplar or ash or oak, but do we all see any given tree in the same way? And who is to define what the "essential principle" is in the case of any given play? Coleridge's theory of dramatic illusion provided a basis for his critical interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, and did away with the idea of applying external rules by which to judge them. It was more radical, however, than he realized, for by internalizing the process of imaginative engagement by which organic form is recognized, he empowered the reader and auditor: the idea of "inward illusion" encourages each of us to construct

¹⁴ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, (3 vols, 1783), II 523; cited LL I 79.

our own imaginative response to and understanding of a play. At the end of a lecture in Bristol in 1813 Coleridge threw caution to the winds in his peroration:

O blest is He who not only in the theatre, but in the probationary Play of Human Life, possesses a life & creative joy in his own Heart, which by the Strength of the inward Illusion can supply the defects of the outward scene – O happy the Actor on the Stage of real Life. For whom in the becoming Warmth and honest Fervor of his own Part the daubed Landscapes on the wormeaten Canvas, bloom as a Paradise. And whom the shifting of the scenes awakens not out of his delightful Vision. (LL I 543)

Here the operations of illusion are extended to the “Play” of daily life, and take their effectiveness from “creative joy”, making up for defects in the theatre and in the world conceived as another stage. Coleridge may have been thinking of his own failures and disappointments, and too much should not be made of a final rhetorical gesture in a lecture devoted to Hamlet, a dramatic character who seemed to reflect his own weaknesses; but his remarks show how easily the idea of “inward illusion” could slide into a compensatory substitute for life’s inadequacies.