From

The Coleridge Bulletin

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

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

Are Coleridge's Plays Worth the Candle?

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1. Obstacles to Face

I PUT THE QUESTION bluntly because it is unavoidable. A lot can be said about Coleridge's plays—as the papers on this occasion have proved—but a gap in understanding remains. We can talk about the significance of Albert/Alvar fighting in the Netherlands and the Inquisition and oppression in Spain in *Osorio/Remorse*, or the restoration of European monarchy in 1815 as a background to *Zapolya*,[1] and we overlook the question the majority still asks. We can discuss "the willing suspension of disbelief" and stage illusion as a "waking dream", and whether Coleridge's practice measures up to his theory, and the question doesn't go away: it remains, like Hamlet's father's ghost. Are the plays just for Coleridge specialists and specialists in the history of drama? Anyone who is already hooked doesn't complain, has much to learn, but those with a passing fair knowledge of Coleridge aren't silenced. What have his plays to do with the three most famous poems, or with *Frost at Midnight* and *Dejection: An Ode*, or even with *The Devil's Walk* and *Youth and Age*? Surely, the kind of play represented by *Zapolya* is long dead and gone.

A proper answer involves large issues. I want to address the question with reference to a particular text that I think is particularly convincing, but I'll list some of the surrounding issues now. They are so large that we'll never arrive at Coleridge's plays if we linger among them, so by a list I mean a short list. First, though drama is a fast-growing part of school and university education, the curriculum it seeks to modify remains predominantly literary. Undergraduates who are able to understand how poems and novels work are often perplexed by drama, unless they concentrate on drama (instead of on poems and novels) at school. Readers most likely to pick up Coleridge's *Poetical Works* are still likely to think the plays an option they can do without; it's the part of the Bollingen set that is the best second-hand bargain. *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, whose contents are based on hardheaded research into what worldwide users want, doesn't think it worthwhile to include a chapter on the plays

Secondly, I think there is always a problem when someone turns out to be good at more than one thing, and such a problem becomes more acute as time passes. The categories of intellectual labour harden as they multiply, which has to do with the organisation of advanced capitalism and identity politics, and the implications of this fact extend into the business of literature as well as everything else. Henry James wrote a play, *Guy Domville,*[2] but it was a disastrous failure and we remember him as a great novelist. Samuel Beckett

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[1] Discussed by William Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama and the Rhetoric of Agency* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and George Taylor, *The French Revolution and the London Stage, 1789-1805* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), among others.

[2] St James's Theatre in Jan 1895.

succeeded equally with novels and plays but left his critics with an even bigger problem by writing simultaneously in English and French, so the question of language precedes the question of fiction or drama in the Dewey Library-Classification System. An inexorable law requires a complex situation to fit under a single heading one way or another, and Coleridge's plays are relegated for the same reason as Harold Pinter's poems. In an age of specialisation, *a priori* reasoning and common instinct tell us one good thing must come second to another.

A third obstacle in the way of coming to terms with Coleridge's plays, to my mind, is a narrow understanding of the body of his poems by itself. His success in a kind of poem labelled "supernatural" chimes with the march of literary history to an extent that the famous three often become the measure of everything else. In truth, Coleridge wrote many kinds of poetry successfully—political poems, love poems, occasional poems, satires—and yet subjective lyric is the standard by which the other kinds are measured. This narrowing of his poetic achievement to lyric falsifies an understanding of all the kinds of poetry he wrote, and the elevation of lyric demotes its opposite, drama, in particular. Put positively, if his poetic output could be understood as containing several centres and as polyvalent, our understanding of it would extend naturally to include drama and would be enriched.

Coleridge's success in writing drama only exacerbates the problem. *Remorse* was performed at Drury Lane twenty-three times, all told; it was the most successful new play of the 1813 London season. This was followed by twenty-three different productions in the provinces, plus performances at New York, Philadelphia and Boston up to 1823. It was chosen by managers and actors as the play to be performed on their benefit nights many times over. *Zapolya* was performed ten times at the Surrey Theatre and chosen by the theatre manager for his own benefit night at the close of the season. Indeed, as Southey said, if *Osorio* had been staged in 1798, "it is more probable that Coleridge in the course of those intermediate years would have produced other and better plays, not less to the amendment of the existing stage and the permanent honour of English literature, than to the advantage of his family."[3] We might even be able to admit that Coleridge's plays were among the best of their time if he hadn't written anything else. However, he wrote the *Mariner* and suchlike, and we can't see how he might have been equally serious on both occasions. The success of his plays is an embarrassment to admirers of his poems, and the few themes that are shared are small comfort to annotators. How could such a high Romantic poet be a crowd-puller in a Regency popular form? How do we explain to ourselves the crossover, if such it is? It's as if we learned that Jeremy Prynne (or Geoffrey Hill) contributed successful episodes of The Archers or Coronation Street.

Fourthly and last, even when one's sense of Coleridge's poetic enterprise

[3] Southey to Wade Browne, 18 Mar 1813: *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry (2 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) II 49.

broadens to include all of its kinds, the same enterprise needs to be seen alongside his interests outside poetry. While making poetry was an almost redemptive occupation for him for a while, it was, for much the larger part of his life, subordinate to interests in philosophy and theology. Even at the time of composing *Kubla Khan*, during the Stowey *annus mirabilis*, he doubted its absolute worth. Yeats could feel happy with his *Crazy Jane* poems but we avoid the issue of why Coleridge was forever dubious about *Kubla*: he understood the question of morality to lie beyond the making and remaking of selfhood, and held it to be connected with truth beyond poetry. Such understanding is a distinctive strength of conversation poems like *The Nightingale* and love poems like *The Improvisatore*—as early Victorians saw but we moderns and postmoderns tend to be blind to.[4] Appalling though it may seem to some of Coleridge's present-day admirers, poetry was not the most important thing in life: not at all. If he sometimes wrote as if it was, he more often wrote otherwise. The result is not a debt paid to morality by art: his poetry remains a considerable body of art built on moral foundations, at times exceeding what the foundations can bear.

All told, I think, Coleridge's legacy is complicated because one has to keep all the parts of the picture in the frame, move between various interests and kinds of writing, and resist the temptation to over-interpret features that reinforce present-day prejudices. His plays present a particular crux in literary production, as problematic as the distinctive version of Christianity in his larger thinking. We don't know what to do with either of them; we can't believe how we need to think in order to appreciate their true importance. However, as you must appreciate, we could linger among such very large issues and never get round to talking about a specific play, and I want specifically to discuss *Zapolya*.

2. Coleridge's Learning Curve

I said Coleridge was easy with Romantic drama: he moved into playwriting instinctively and mastered it with practice. The several versions of *Remorse* trace a learning-process that *Diadestè* makes a half-hearted attempt to reprise and that was completed in *Zapolya*. *Zapolya*, his last complete play, makes use of existing theatre conventions critically and positively. It "amends the existing stage" not only in the sense of moral reformation intended by Southey but formally (technically). It coincidentally embodies a way forward for early nineteenth-century theatre which was continuous with its past (I mean, not in opposition to it, as Joannie Baillie's closet dramas are [5])—although such a way forward was not pursued. The thing to talk about is how the plays work as

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[4] Nicely explicated by Joanne Wilkes, "Snuffing Out an Article: Sara Coleridge and the Early Victorian Reception of Keats" in *Nervous Reactions: Victorian Recollections of Romanticism*, ed. Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp.189-206 (196-197 esp.).

[5] For which see Catherine B. Burroughs, Closet Stages: *Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), and her edited volume, *Women in British Romantic Theatre: Drama, Performance, and Society, 1790-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

plays, but first I should remind you how *Zapolya* evolved thematically.

All Coleridge's plays contain large moral ideas. He was prepared to accept the theatrical conditions he found, and to work to improve them, but he adapted them to his own ends. As a result of such a compromise, the plays are much less various in their intention than his poems—which range from formal experiments, to private jokes, to writing in which he explores his own feelings or states his beliefs. Drama is a more socialised form, assumes more broadly based conventions, and Coleridge's plays treat the grand theme of Conscience in a manifestly public place. They are united by a common purpose, articulated by a maturing sense of theatrical possibility. They are formally more consistent than his poems because they work within limits, meeting audience-expectations half way.

A play that didn't work out, *Diadestè*, provides a helpful starting-point. The fragment describes an Arab couple who have an English woman slave. They are bound by a custom that requires either one to repeat a word ("Diadestè") when receiving something from the other. The Arab wife is distressed because she has forfeited the woman slave to her husband by failing to repeat the Diadestè, and she knows the slave will replace her in her husband's affections. The word Diadestè is explained as meaning "the bait without the hook" and signifies, in the situation described, a restriction within which freedom becomes possible, a formality that enables trust. The fragment sets up a situation describing "the first entrance of a jealous Fear" into the heart: "The look of alienated Affection, seen for the first time by a fond and unsuspecting Wife!" (PW III 2 1004). The English slave, whose name echoes that of the Arab wife, is virtuous and the wife's true friend. She promises to help redeem the situation, and this is where the fragment breaks off.

Au fond, the moral situation is the same as in *Christabel*, which breaks off at the same point for the same reason.[6] Original harmony is overtaken by suspicion and doubt, through no fault of the principals involved. The harmony will be restored—evil and guilt will be transformed—with the help of a heaven-sent guardian, although, during the period when Coleridge wrote *Christabel* and *Diadestè*, he could not work the project through. The leading characters bear a different relation to one another and possess different moral equivalents, but both stories turn on an unthinking action that goes wrong, at which point the stories themselves jam and are abandoned by their author. Perhaps the play-version offered a better opportunity to work the story through to a conclusion, even at a less personal, more socialised level. Orientalising themes are present—the degeneracy of Muslim culture, the redemptive agency of the Christian slave—but they are not the point. Coleridge is not writing to convert the heathen, nor simply to exploit current fashion, he is trying to work through an argument about saving his soul.

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[6] I should insert here that all my references to *Christabel* and *Zapolya* assume a familiarity with John Beer's invaluable appendix to his *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959) pp.301-04, in which he maps shared images and themes.

Osorio, written during the autumn prior to *Christabel*, turned on a version of the same dilemma; and *Remorse*, a better-realised version of the earlier play, not a separate play (see CPW III 1 150), embodies the dilemma more coherently. I don't mean to suggest *Christabel* was planned as a poem about remorse, but rather that Coleridge's inability to work it through to completion was for many years accompanied by remorse connected with the subject-matter and surrounding personal circumstances. Coleridge set out to write a tragedy that turned on the moral-theological concept stated on the title page:

> Remorse is as the heart, in which it grows:
> If that be gentle, it drops balmy dews
> Of true repentance; but if proud and gloomy,
> It is a poison-tree, that pierced to the inmost
> Weeps only tears of poison! (CPW III 2 1237)

The lines emphasise the difference between remorse and virtuous penitence. The concept of Remorse, Coleridge explained, means "the Anguish & Disquietude arising from the Self-contradiction introduced into the Soul by Guilt—a feeling, which is good or bad according as the Will makes use of it."[7] Isidore turns it to good when he repents his murderous collaboration with Ordonio; Ordonio finds atonement in death, but remains the slave of his crimes. His death brings the end of the play, but the moral dilemma persists. Coleridge's intention was always frankly to present, not work through to an answer in the action, but the consequence is that his audience is left in limbo. He tinkered with the end of the play in production, but it remains unresolved on a dramatic level in every version.

Coleridge thought *Zapolya* a better play than *Remorse*. It brings a closely related moral theme into sharper focus and gives it an improved theatrical realisation. He described the play to William Sotheby as less "interesting in the Closet, as the Remorse—I mean, that it is less a Poem—but… proportionally more so on the stage. All passages of independent or ornamental beauty I purposely avoided."[8] Specifically, it better exploits the circumstances of a large auditorium that stayed illuminated during performances and thereby encouraged dispersed attention (looking round at other theatre-goers, some of whom were there principally to be seen and admired, and many of whom were talking). It does not ignore the fact of socially mixed audiences (some of whom were only too ready to protest, even riot), and it uses the broad effects needed to focus their attention. It assesses the gap between the action on stage and the action taking place among the audience, and the quality of illusion thereby allowed. It pretends to be no more than a "Winter's Tale", but the manner of the telling exploits specific theatrical conditions.

Zapolya is unusual in incorporating a twenty-year interval into the structure

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[7] Coleridge to Southey, 8 [9] Feb 1813: CL III 433-44.
[8] Coleridge to William Sotheby, 31 Jan 1816: CL IV 620.

of the play frankly, not as a gap to be smoothed but as the hinge on which the plot turns. Imponderable causes are addressed through effects that do not pretend to deceive. Muddy psychology is replaced by a technique approximating to masque. The play is unusual, too, in self-consciously depending upon the performance of women actors, "in an equal, perhaps, in a greater degree than on those of the [men] Actors. For there are three female Characters, each perfectly distinct from the other, and all prominent."[9] And, for this reason, he wondered even before he had completed the play if he should offer it to Covent Garden, not to Drury Lane. At the same time, since the staging of his previous play (*Remorse*), Coleridge had inched his way towards the solution of long-standing metaphysical-religious questions, even if he did not find answers to them for another several years, and, even then, find them difficult to articulate. *Zapolya* romances its way towards *Aids to Reflection* and *Opus Maximum*, and entertained audiences at the Surrey Theatre with just a hint of what those volumes stand for.

One might indeed reckon that *Zapolya* is the most satisfactory play Coleridge wrote. It is preceded in manner by the abandoned experiment that is *Diadestè* and, at the same time, it builds less on his success in the theatre than on what he learned from difficulties and mistakes. It presents, in a form that foregrounds deliberate contrivance, themes he began to explore seriously from the time Wordsworth showed him the proper ambition of poetry and it thereby takes the measure of the problem on which his intellectual life turned. True, it is a two-dimensional sketch, but its novelty and coherence is founded on the same enabling limitation and it inaugurated a period of confidence and effort in his prose-writing in which he brought a lifetime-argument to conclusion. True, it is an entertainment, and the subsequent moral-theological writing carries a weight of historical argument and extended consideration, but the theatrical fiction contains a balance of values that the prose-writing works towards. It offers a Pisgah-sight of the end of the journey.

3. Necessary Distinctions

I said the only worthwhile way to look at Coleridge's plays is from the point of view of drama. Following this line, set aside the *Robespierre* collaboration and fragments like *Diadestè*, however interesting their connections are, and concentrate on three titles: *Osorio*/*Remorse* considered as the first, the pair of Schiller translations considered as the second, and *Zapolya* as the third. My argument is that the sequence of *Osorio* followed by the acted and then the printed versions of *Remorse* makes up a continuous evolutionary process that, despite the period of time involved, was never worked through to a satisfactory completion. The remains of too much clumsy prentice-work proved too hard-

[9] Coleridge to R. H. Brabant, 16 Jan 1816: CL IV 617. On the other hand, Julie Carlson maintains that "it mobilizes even more offensive strategies than does *Wallenstein* in its campaign against women": *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.122. Her book put a number of important arguments into circulation for the first time. See also Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

won to abandon and this got in the way of whole-scale revision.

To my mind, the drawn-out development of *Osorio/Remorse* is of interest mainly because of the completeness of the record. *Osorio* was written hastily to take advantage of an offer that a theatre manager (R. B. Sheridan) never quite made. It reflects themes and motifs that were circulating in Coleridge's other writings at the time, it bounces off Wordsworth's contemporary *Borderers*, it incorporates a sense of what contemporary theatre could do and how a sorry state of affairs could be improved. Its further evolution into *Remorse*, which was completed in dialogic relation to practical realities, represents a steep learning curve for the amenable author, which, even so, was incomplete. As I said, too much of the original play remained and could not be reshaped to allow a satisfactory conclusion. Osorio/Ordonio's death remained a forever-uncertain event and, while the tandem versions (stage and printed) are usual enough in their time, they reflect a commitment to undramatic material that Coleridge was unwilling to relinquish. Altogether, the wealth of documentation and the success of the play on the stage shouldn't disguise its true significance, which was most of all as encouragement and practical understanding to the benefit of the author. Even the rival success of Maturin's *Bertram* (1816), to which Coleridge responded with special keenness (in *Biographia Literaria*), was most valuable for the lesson it confirmed for him about popular taste.

The Schiller translations are complicated to talk about in the present context because, of course, the base-text was not subject to radical change. One could talk about moments that caught the translator's sympathy—to which he responded with particular success, and so on—but the overall constraints are obvious. The plotting, the characterisation, the dramaturgy were all given. Joyce Crick has worked through the translation with great sensitivity and will be speaking about it tomorrow morning. I would only remark now that that Coleridge wrote some his best blank verse on this occasion. It fills another writer's framework—this panoramic chronicle history-tragedy, fuelled by a sense of destiny on a continental scale—but speech-by-speech and often scene-by-scene, the lines have variation and range of a kind Coleridge never achieved elsewhere. His manner echoes earlier English drama, although it never bogs down in pastiche; it moves more lightly than it might have done if Coleridge had been centred on the psychology of his own evolving creations; the sheer bulk of the task of translating and the speed at which he had to work leave his skill all the more exposed; the verse possesses a pleasurable quality in itself, lending the style a sort of ventriloqual clarity. The enormous task proved to be the turning point of his understanding of Shakespeare's language and psychology, opening out that quality of associative density to which he himself was so much alive. The two Wallenstein translations hang out to dry the most sustained passages of blank verse Coleridge ever achieved. It is a complication for my present argument that the washing line was provided by Schiller, so I must pass by.

In comparison with the plays I've been talking about, the third one, *Zapolya*, could look like the poor relation. The writing doesn't have the consistently impressive resonance of *The Piccolomoni* or *The Death of Wallenstein*. It was rejected by the theatre it was written for and had to look for a home elsewhere, south of the river. There is much more material to discuss surrounding *Osorio*/*Remorse*, and Coleridge the imaginative writer is popularly assumed to have given up trying long before 1816. So, when we come to *Zapolya*, the question is bound to be, why rest a case for Coleridge the dramatist on what is assumed to be the anti-climax to a stumbling career?

G. Wilson Knight is one of the few to have admitted merit in the play and he set it on a level with "its precursor in miniature", *Kubla Khan*.[10] Knight's kind of mythic criticism is no longer in fashion, and the overlapping patterns of imagery on which his argument is based may persuade few readers today, but many of his incidental perceptions continue to strike home. His reading of Shakespeare's plays has been described as poetic rather than dramatic, his critical judgement has been called into question, but he had a first-hand understanding of theatrical values and a mind uncomplicated by received opinion. While the pronouncement that *Zapolya* is "[Coleridge's] greatest full-length work" is distracting, certainly, his remarks on natural and architectural settings, his Shakespearean comparisons (with *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus*, for example), his observations on the uses of music and the wide register of verse given to the cast of characters are acute and compelling. The case for Coleridge the dramatist rests here, in the play itself, not in forging distant connections, and I shall have reason to quote him again later.

4. Arriving at Zapolya

The beginning of a solid case for Coleridge the dramatist is suggested by Frederick Burwick, who remarks that "Schelegel and Coleridge taught their generation a new way of looking at the drama, of watching their own watching."[11] Burwick has in mind Coleridge's theoretical writing and, when he discusses Coleridge's practice, he contrasts it with Ludwig Tieck's self-conscious metadrama, *Puss-in-Boots* (*Der gestiefelte Kater*, 1797). Tieck uses metadrama to expose the workings of illusion, to expose its trickery: to pull the rug from under the feet of his audience. Coleridge raises his audience's self-consciousness to serve a different purpose: to concentrate, not explode, attention. He absorbed a self-conscious tradition on the English stage, which extended from Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1671) to Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779) and beyond, and owes little or nothing to German Romantic irony. His

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[10] *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (2nd ed. London: Methuen, 1959), pp.160-77 specifically. The description, "its precursor in miniature," appears on p.174; the other description, "greatest full-length work," appears on p.171.

[11] *Illusion and the Drama: Critical Theory of the Enlightenment and Romantic Era* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p.303. The eighteenth-century English tradition referred to later in this paragraph is described by Dane Farnsworth Smith and M.L.Lawhon, *Plays about the Theatre in England, 1737-1800: or, The Self-conscious Stage from Foote to Sheridan* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979).

practice in *Remorse*, and even more subtly in *Zapolya*, could have taught a generation how serious drama was possible at a time when opportunities for improvement seemed bleak.

Take the Cave in *Zapolya*, Act II scene i: "that deep romantic chasm", backdrop to so much crucial action in the play. It is home to Zapolya ("the appointed spirit,/ That hath kept watch round this drear cavern" CPW III 2 1418) and Raab Kiuprili ("Heaven's immediate minister, dread spirit!" CPW III 2 1420): that is, to both the sweet voice of reconciliation and the stern voice of justice. Caves and grottoes are standard features of the Gothic repertoire but, instead of dwelling on the cave to arouse horror and fear, Coleridge switches attention onto the characters who pass in front. Kiuprili speaks from within the cave, first to Glycine and then to Bethlen/Andreas, pretending on both occasions to be the Warwolf. We aren't terrified because we know the voice is Kiuprili's, so our attention inclines towards Glycine's response. We aren't wholly caught up in the voice; we don't get drawn into the darkness: we measure its effect downstage, in the glare of footlights. Again, when Kiuprili speaks out of the cave to Bethlen, it is the latter's brave nobility that shines through. In each case—and here the concept of metadrama becomes relevant—we realise our supposition about theatrical illusion has turned inside out. We watch the actors playing Glycine and Bethlen being manipulated by an unseen actor (Kiuprili), so that we (the audience) understand an action in which manipulation is advanced to the foreground: if you like, the scene on stage has been made deliberately stagy. The paradox is that undercutting the illusion removes a barrier and places us on stage, inside the frame. Zoom! We experience, at first hand, the emotions with which Glycine and Andreas respond to the blank unknown.

One might compare the effect contrived by the scene in the Hall of Armory in *Osorio*/*Remorse* (Act III sc i). The Armory scene derives from Schiller's unfinished novel, *The Ghost-Seer* (*Der Geisterseher* 1786-89), which Coleridge expanded;[12] and the reviewers described the spectacle, accompanied by eerie music and incantational song, as the most memorable moment of the evening. As Burwick says, "This is certainly the sort of trickery that many in the audience had paid their money to see."[13] Alvar acts the sorcerer, his elaborate contrivance is a spectacular flop (the villain walks out before the climactic moment), but the point, as before, is that the contrivance is patent. We, the audience, are in on the sorcerer's secret, although Teresa and Ordonio are not and we therefore focus on their reaction with greater concentration. The workings of illusion are exposed, but instead of prompting us to throw up our hands in laughter, the trickery turns the tables on our objection to the premise that we are in a theatre where all is pretend. Again, I remind you, the lighting and scenery in the theatre of Coleridge's time were crude by today's standards, the auditorium was vast and the audience was unruly. Coleridge

[12] Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy*, pp.116-17.
[13] *Illusion and the Drama*, p.268.

supplies a standard feature of the evening entertainment and turns it to advantage. His manoeuvre draws us in, forces the issue like *The Mouse-Trap* in *Hamlet*. Wide-awake disillusion comes to the aid of theatrical illusion.

The Cave is the Warwolf's lair, and Coleridge is careful to note the derivation of his Warwolf from a poem by Michael Drayton (CPW III 2 1371). Drayton's poem—variously titled "The Man in the Moon" and "The Mooncalf"—begins with a ceremony in honour of Pan, and has to do with the Endymion-myth and the ambivalence of various sorts of tutelary influence. This last is the point of the literary reference: a feared monster that eventually reveals itself as protective and benign, an unknown blank that is significant for what is projected on it, like the moon in the sky. The play draws on a long tradition: the footnote hints at how it is ambiguously employed. The cave is a background that clarifies crucial stages of the action as they play before it, a sort of sounding chamber of the demiurge. The "deep Romantic chasm" harbours what prove to be benign tutelary spirits that enable Glycine and Bethlen/Andreas to make the rite of passage into their shared future. A yawning blank helps them to articulate truths that prefigure the restoration of order to society.

5. Still Centres

The scene involving the voices from the Cave (Act II, sc i) begins with Glycine's song (CPW III 2 1386-87). Note that a song occurs at a similar point in the Hall of Armory scene in *Osorio/Remorse*; and likewise note the position of Adelaide's song in *The Death of Robespierre*, "Tell me, on what holy ground | May domestic peace be found?" (CPW III 2 22). Adelaide celebrates an ideal that stands over against the destructive violence of French revolutionary terror. If she and her lyric have little to do with the dramatic action, that is exactly the point. "In a cottag'd vale she dwells | List'ning to the Sabbath bells!" For a brief moment, the ostensible action turns inside-out and is shown as passing madness, pseudo-action, impermanent. In such a moment, as sudden as when Spenser's Duessa melts into a witch before our eyes, we step back and simultaneously enter the same action at a deeper level; that is, break through the theatrical surface into the deep-structure plot.[14] In *Osorio/Remorse*, the song, *Miserere Domine!* (CPW III 2 1279-80), strikes a sadder chord. Instead of a momentary glimpse of harmony against which turbulence is measured (*Robespierre*), or ecstatic promise of the resolution to be achieved (Glycine's Song), the anonymous singer in *Remorse* prefigures a compromised resolution. The condition of Remorse is distinct from the state of Penitence, as I explained earlier, and the echoing chant can only continue: "The boatmen rest their oars and say, | Miserere Domine!"

Similar moments of clarification appear in Coleridge's poems, where they

[14] When Coleridge read Monk Lewis's play, *The Castle Spectre*, at Shewsbury at the time he and Wordsworth were engaged in writing their own first full-length plays, he singled out "a pretty little Ballad-song", with a "simplicity & naturalness of its own" at odds with the surrounding drama: Coleridge to Wordsworth 23 Jan 1798 (CL I 379).

occupy a similar structural position, but a case can be made that the plays make better use of them. The earliest critics of the *Ancient Mariner* were quick to point out that the action of Parts V and VI (the two voices in the air) is surplus to narrative requirement. Every reader feels his progress interrupted while he has to listen to the tutelary spirits, the voice of one stern, the other soft as honey-dew, commenting on the action. But the supernatural dialogue is a vision within a dream, which is Coleridge's description of the dislocated fragment of *Kubla Khan*: the vision stands outside, interrupts and underpins the surrounding narrative structure of his ballad. Compare his similar strategy in *The Nightingale*, the conversation poem written at the moment he began to enlarge the *Mariner* with Parts V and VI. The conversation poem likewise describes a waking dream followed by a vision within that dream: on this the poem turns, in a similar meta-dramatic way by means of which we cut to the heart of the matter. Or compare the way narrative frames are juggled in the poem, *Love*: one story is nested within another so that, by means of a kind of transference between two stories, the imaginary becomes real. "The subject becomes the agent: the Poet who initiated the story comes to be acted upon like the Knight."[15] I talk about meta-drama and narrative frames but Coleridge is actually making things happen by means of a poetical device. Such an event is what he meant by Imagination, and it happens in *Zapolya* as well as in the poems we all know.

Zapolya specifically exemplifies "Fancy under the conditions of Imagination," as Coleridge identified such a quality in Spenser (L 2 411), where it is accompanied by "a feminine tenderness & almost maidenly purity—above all, deep moral earnestness." The play may resemble Shakespearean romance in its story of usurpation ended and a new generation discovering its birthright, but the quality of the verse is quite different. There are moments of subtlety and complexity, but they do not approach the deeper, Shakespearian harmonies that echo in the *Wallenstein* translations. The verse instead works to suspend an audience in a kind of "mental space" that Coleridge compared to Alhadra's dream in *Osorio* / *Remorse* (L 2 410; cf. PW III 1 135, 2 1306). Its quality is shared by Coleridge's later poetry as a whole, which, as I have argued elsewhere, he began to write at a relatively early age, when he was less than halfway through his life.[16] It is idle to complain that it is sub-Shakespearean or rest the case on Shakespearean touches. It aims overall at a different effect determined by different theatrical circumstances.

6. A New Kind of Theatre

I will briefly try to clarify this last point and extend it. Theatre nowadays resembles a reading-circle experience: the auditorium goes dark and silent, the situation on stage is close enough for us to appreciate subtly shifting points of

[15] J.C.C.Mays, "Coleridge's 'Love': 'All he could manage, more than he could'" in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J.B.Beer*, ed. Tim Fulford and Morton D.Paley (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S.Brewer, 1993), pp.49-66 at 52.

[16] "The Later Poetry" in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.89-99.

view and nuances. We peer into situations as if we were present on the fourth wall, wrapt in a living book; the worst thing is for the people on stage to be stagy. Coleridge does not attempt to work towards this situation, as we might assume he would want to from his criticism. Nor did he attempt to overturn it (I've mentioned Ludwig Tieck, but see also Kleist's marionnette theatre, both looking forward to Brecht's alienation effect): the tradition on which he draws, as I suggested, is more English than German. So, while his reading of Shakespeare's plays was intimate and novelistic, he accepts conditions for his own playwriting where staging is closer to operatic conditions. He understands the constraints that follow when an actor can only be heard from downstage, from where he must project to the house at the top of his voice in order to be heard. He peoples his stage with either crowds or couples, marking shifts of mood with entrances and exits. It commits him to scene after scene of two-person dialogue.[17] Spectacle and music necessarily play a major role.

I made the point that, as a beginner, Coleridge was inexperienced and that *Osorio* spreads its foundations awkwardly through the play. Events before the opening of the action never become entirely clear; they unfold through a fog that never disperses. *Remorse* inserts a preliminary scene in which the attempt on Alvar's life is clarified, along with an explanation of how he spent the intervening years, and the digressions are pruned. But the imperfectly restructured play only makes evident that its true centre is the end of an action: the drawn-out resolution. Coleridge's drama works with beginnings and endings, and empties what comes between. In these circumstances, plot is less important than the state of mind of those who live through the reconciliation of opposing themes, and the problem in *Remorse* is that an element of intrigue remains. The psychology of the characters over-stretches the cause-and-effect plot—the violence and needless savagery of the scene between Ordonio and Isidore in the cavern, Alhadra's revenge at the close—and this leaves the final things that constitute the guiding principle of the play muddled.

Zapolya manages drama of Conscience better by presenting the mainspring of events frankly as a prelude (reinforced by "an incidental Address" in performance: see CPW III 2 1328, 1426). Attention is thereby thrown onto the ending and the manner in which the action is resolved, and drama proper begins in front of the Warwolf's cave: a succession of characters responds to voices from within, and Glycine's song gives us a promise of the outcome. Subsequent scenes establish the position of the other players in the drama, and the end of the action is signalled by a second song—this time by the hunters in chorus (CPW III 2 1415-16)—presaging the end of the Warwolf's reign. The plot has nothing to do with the Aristotelian phases of beginning, middle and end: it turns on a song. The control of dramatic effect is more adept than in *Remorse*: Emerick is presented with considerable savagery, yet there is room for humour at expense of the clownish Laska (e.g. CPW III 2 1394-95, 1398-1400). The change of heart wrought on Casimir by Sarolta and his father,

[17] What Burwick calls "dual monologues" (*Illusion and the Drama*, p. 276).

Kiuprili, is properly integrated (see Casimir's solilioquy at CPW III 1411-12). The parts of Zapolya, Sarolta and Glycine are balanced against each other and proportionate to the theme they embody, in contrast to the confused and confusing Maria/Teresa in *Osorio/Remorse*. Distracting crosscurrents, like the introduction of the Catholic Inquisition and the Moors into the earlier play, are excluded.

In both plays—and in *Zapolya* with less distraction —the action onstage is disjunct from what most deeply engages us. We are concerned by a theme that lies behind the to-and-fro of event. It is articulated by Bethlen/Andreas, quoting his mother, the presiding spirit of the play:

> Thou cans't not hasten it! leave thou to Heaven
> The work of Heaven: and with a silent spirit
> Sympathize with the powers that work in silence!
> (CPW III 2 1397-98)

The words echo Kiuprili's pronouncement, while he is unseen within the cave, at the close of the preceding scene:

> Patience! Truth! Obedience!
> Be thy whole soul transparent! so the Light
> Thou seekest, may enshrine itself within thee! (CPW III 2 1392)

Events are not driven onward by an unwinding spring of causality, but are a series of happenings. Turns in the plot are less significant than an evolving situation that depends less on human agents than the supercession of grace. "O time, thou must untangle this, not I; | It is too hard a knot for me t' untie."[18] Coleridge's starting point is articulated by Milton in *Paradise Lost*—

> the better fortitude
> Of patience and heroic martyrdom
> Unsung [19]

—and *Zapolya* is another example of an answerable style. Despite the late-Shakespearean situations it draws upon, it is filled with the spirit of Spenserian romance (it is significant that Drayton came to mind during the writing of it). Deliberately distanced, appreciably patterned in its plotting, it is ordered according to a principle of inaction at variance with the movement of conventional (secular) drama. The blank verse chooses not to embody the muscular energy of changing decisions; it suspends us in attentive reverie. The principal roles show figures who do not act but are the more acted upon. In the conditions for which the play was conceived, we hear the spoken lines from among a mixed audience of up to 3000 people, and events onstage

[18] Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* II ii 39-40.
[19] Book IX, lines 31-33.

command only our dispersed attention. Magical moments of meta-drama and song break through, and connect with the radical theme.

I cited earlier Wilson's Knight's pages on *Zapolya* and his attempt to join the play with *Kubla Khan*. Whatever about the larger argument, his accompanying observations on the movement of Coleridge's blank-verse are compelling; for instance, on the way abstract thinking is absorbed into the movement of the verse so that we feel it as it happens:

> Mark how the scorpion, falsehood,
> Coils round in its perplexity, and fixes
> Its sting in its own head? (CPW III 2 1353)

Again, he observes the way Coleridge's political argument works out in shifting dramatic contexts. Thus, Emerick and Raab Kiuprili are allowed to speak the same deep truth, that no hereditary honours outweigh true worth. Emerick says:

> Whence sprang the name of Emperor? Was it not
> By nature's fiat? In the storm of triumph,
> 'Mid warriors' shouts, did her oracular voice
> Make itself heard: Let the commanding spirit
> Posses the station of command! (CPW III 2 1352)

Which only echoes Raab Kiuprili's thinking twenty lines earlier:

> The longest line, that ever tracing herald
> Or found or feign'd, placed by a beggar's soul
> Hath but a mushroom's date in the comparison:
> And with the soul, the conscience is co-eval,
> Yea, the soul's essence.

And to which Emerick had replied:

> Conscience, good my lord,
> Is but the pulse of reason…

"How firmly that last remark integrates an abstraction into vitally physical categories," Knight remarks,[20] and he repeatedly points to Coleridge's control over the theatrical means of projecting complicated ideas. I would only emphasize that, while *Zapolya* draws on the great tradition of English drama, the tradition is applied to specific conditions and such conditions are neither to be ignored nor deplored. Coleridge was right to persist with writing for the theatre for so long because his commitment to compromise with popular taste preserved the balance his intellectual-emotional argument depends upon.

[20] Page 162. Knight's commentary on the previous passages quoted in the present paragraph begins on p.160.

7. "The sweet, sweet food of hope and consolation"[21]

To sum up, *Zapolya* makes a new kind of theatre in the way Scott's novels make a new kind of fiction, even as both remain wholly of their time. Coleridge worked with the audience he found and discovered a way to realise his own purposes. His plays embody issues of private concern (a sense of self-division imaged in conflict between brothers, shadowed by a sense of guilt and redemption, and an intuition of presiding spirits who are not always kind), but he was, from the start, conscious of working in a public forum. His best-known lyric poems wind into problems and pursue them wherever they lead: his plays, by contrast, admit the need for collaboration and compromise. They represent a socialised kind of imaginative writing very different from *Kubla Khan*, the *Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, which are private, uncomplicated by practical exigencies, daunting for their author when they led in directions he did not want to go. If we think of them as the purer kind poetry, this is only to admit they make up their own rules.

The gist of my argument is that drama, where one works within the limits of what is possible, gave Coleridge scope to do things he could not do the other way. Writing under constraint, he completed a project analogous to *Christabel* that could not be worked through while he policed his own poetical conduct. *Zapolya* is not a travesty of the poem he failed to complete: the poem could only be written out in dramatic form, on more public terms, and I think it is idle to protest the result. One has to accept the multiple centres of Coleridge's writing I spoke about at the beginning: his facility in conventional forms, his ability and sheer cleverness, his lack of arrogance as an author. The displacement of the *Christabel* project into *Zapolya* puts into practice, with considerable sophistication, what he learned from nearly twenty years of experimentation and practical experience. It satisfied popular expectations and surpassed the expectations of theatre management. The lyrical ballad was not the form to untangle the emotional bind of a relatively young man: such a form offered every reason to begin with no reasonable hope of concluding. The play that eventually contained the theme is a rare thing indeed, a play of conscience within the exigencies of Regency theatre. It displays a novel understanding of technical possibilities, resting upon a confident moral foundation.

For such reasons, expanding one's sense of Coleridge's poetical activity to include his plays doesn't diminish his achievement: on the contrary. His plays may temporarily survive in a void, unsupported by much critical sense of their worth, but they cry out to be incorporated within an understanding of his writing as a whole—which becomes more explicable, richer and more interesting as a result. I emphasise that such incorporation does not necessitate a dumbing-down of what we should expect to a view of poetry from the doorway of Boots, as some might fear.

The great New Testament scholar, Fenton Hort, author of a remarkable

[21] *Zapolya* Part 2, II. i 123: PW III 2 1389.

essay on Coleridge published 150 years ago, ended by praising the unity of tragedy and comedy in Coleridge's writing, and my case rests on a similar point. Hort was writing about Coleridge's theology and singled out the "grotesque bursts, which sometimes startle the decorous reader." He went on:

> It might be better if some of them had not been written. But let no man accuse him of irreverence, the surest symbol of a rotten heart. There is a prudery about divine things, which may sometimes be innocent, but more commonly belongs to shallow feeling which has no faith in itself or in anything else.[22]

Coleridge's plays likewise exploit a vein of popular sympathy that his most elevated writing does not entirely leave behind. Only a kind of prudery resists the truth that an author who could write with stunning private intensity wrote equally well in a popular form. As Hort said, for all Coleridge's faults and failings, he was sustained by a kind of hope that made his achievement richer and stronger than some of his admirers allow. The range of his writing is a continuum, the plays are part of the explanation of why his better-known poems contain the strengths they do, and *Zapolya* situates you exactly where you need to be to read his poetical works at large.

[22] F.J.A.Hort, "Coleridge" in *Cambridge Essays: Contributed by Members of the University* (London: John W.Parker and Son, 1856), pp.292-351 at 350.