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Coleridge and 'Real Life' Tragedy

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COLERIDGE, literary critic, voracious reader and chief theorist of the Romantic Imagination, is not obvious for analysis as an author who writes from real life, and among his most familiar statements are those that discourage the reader such from attention. His own contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* Coleridge recalls as being primarily 'directed to persons and characters supernatural', and in 'Dejection: An Ode', he regrets the extent of his dedication to dehumanising, 'abstruse research' ('Dejection', l. 89).¹ However, Coleridge's poetic voice is not exclusively indebted to literature. In his preface to 'The Three Graves', which Coleridge took over from Wordsworth in 1797 but did not complete, he indicates the poem's origins: 'The outlines of the Tale are positive Facts, and of no very distant date'. A letter to Thomas Poole of 1809 indicates Coleridge's continued interest in catastrophes befalling actual people: 'Do, do let me have that divine narrative of Robert Walford.'²

Coleridge's letter alludes to an incident related to him by Poole in 1797. In 1789 John Walford, a charcoal burner, murdered his wife, but became a sympathetic figure despite his crime. Walford's wife was faulted in accounts of her death as the saboteur of Walford's engagement to Anne Rice of Adcombe, whose fidelity to Walford to the time of his execution added to the pathos of the episode.³ Due to increasing incidents of murder in Somersetshire, the unconventional decision was made to hang Walford in public and to display his corpse; his exemplary death cast him as a sacrificial victim and therefore a tragic figure.

Coleridge's response to Poole's account is significant: 'That divine narrative of Robert Walford [...] stamps you a Poet of the first Class in the *pathetic* & the *painting* of Poetry, so rarely combined.'⁴ Coleridge implies that a sensitive engagement with actual events is essential to becoming a 'Poet of the first Class'. Similarly, by protesting in the Preface to 'The Three Graves' that 'I was not led to chuse this story from any partiality to the tragic', Coleridge indicates that the poet's duty demands the analysis of authentic suffering.

I wish to establish Coleridge's treatment of real catastrophes as part of a tragic vision. This is compatible with the interpretation of Coleridge's personality as dramatic, as John Beer presents elsewhere in this volume. The engagement with suffering in search of redemption is a frequent theme in Coleridge's works, including the 'Ancient Mariner', 'Dejection' and *Remorse*, and imparting redemptive hope is the function Coleridge associates with all tragic art, reminding William Sotheby sternly in 1802 that 'Atonement is

¹ 'Abstruse research' itself recalls the 'studious thoughts abstruse' of Milton's Adam, underscoring Coleridge's scholarly devotion and the sense of impending personal crisis in 'Dejection' (*Paradise Lost*, VIII.40).

² CL III 235.

³ For Thomas Poole's account see David Worthy, *A Quaintock Tragedy: The Walford Murder of 1789*, 2nd edn (Over Stowey: Friarn Press, 2004), pp. 29-44.

⁴ CL III 235.

altogether in the Spirit of Paganism' of the Greek tragedies.⁵ Coleridge believes that the tradition of tragedy has endured time, changing artistic modes, and the onset of Christianity: 'the chain was never really wholly broken, tho' the connecting Links were often of baser metal.'⁶ As a tragic philosopher, Coleridge views life itself as an enactment of tragic processes, as a kind of play; events, resembling tragic art, can be made to serve the same didactic purpose as ancient tragedy, 'to transport the mind to a sense of its possible greatness during the temporary oblivion of the worthless "thing, we are."⁷ I argue that the principles of ancient drama, as Coleridge understood them, permeate his poems, plays and journalism concerned with events of his time.

Coleridge's writings are crucial to the perception of the Romantic age as a tragic matrix. Repeatedly, Coleridge identifies contemporary persons with tragic characters. Translating *Wallenstein* in 1800, Coleridge complains in a marginal note that the eponym of Schiller's play, lacking 'Strength', is 'not tragic': 'Schiller has drawn weakness [...] hence W[allenstein] evaporates in mock-mysterious speeches.'⁸ To add the quality of 'Strength', to imply that *Wallenstein* is admirable, and therefore that his downfall is a tragic loss, Coleridge 'forms a character of Buonaparte', with the result, he claims, that Schiller's version is 'a little *improved*':⁹

A youth who had scarce seen his twentieth year
Was Wallenstein, when he and I were friends:
Yet even then he was a daring soul:
His frame of mind was serious and severe
Beyond his years; his dreams were of great objects.

(*The Death of Wallenstein*, III.ii.98-102)

Coleridge's interest in the executed Irish-revolutionary Robert Emmet (1778-1803) is that afforded to a flawed hero, one who, Marianne Elliott explains, appeals to the 'gothic tradition' while also engendering his own legacy of 'tragic romance'.¹⁰ In a notebook, Coleridge writes that 'Emmet=mad Raphael painting Ideals of Beauty on the walls of a cell with human Excrement.'¹¹ Timothy Webb indicates Coleridge's awareness of Emmet's tragic flaw in the passage: 'Madness subverts the very basis of his own artistic genius.'¹² Coleridge's comment on Emmet indicates a fascination with duality, a polarity of virtue and fault that typifies such tragic figures as Heracles and Hamlet.

Coleridge engages with actual catastrophes to produce tragic pathos, and

⁵ SWF 120.

⁶ LoL I 48.

⁷ BL II 186.

⁸ PW III 174.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Marianne Elliott, 'Robert Emmet: The Making of a Legend', *British Academy Review*, 8 (2005), 24-27 (p. 24).

¹¹ CN I 1524.

¹² Timothy Webb, 'Coleridge and Robert Emmet: Reading the Text of Irish Revolution', *Irish Studies Review*, 8:3 (2000), 303-23 (p. 312).

does so with political subtext, to produce the 'tragic dissent' that Richard B. Sewall establishes as a central mode in Romanticism.¹³ In a lecture of 1795, Coleridge expresses the need for 'a Revolution bloodless, like Poland's, but not, like Poland's, assassinated by the foul Treason of Tyrants against Liberty.'¹⁴ This ambition permeates Coleridge's dramatic and poetical works prior to the *Lyrical Ballads*. From real suffering Coleridge evokes the tragic to attack the government, and to suggest a general solution to Britain's problems: that a new political system is required to prevent catastrophe.

I: Tragic Dissent

Repeatedly, when writing of real events, Coleridge evokes tragedy by introducing fictional elements, relying on these for pathos rather than the catastrophes themselves. Coleridge's generic classification of *The Fall of Robespierre* adumbrates this process. The play's subtitle states that it is 'an Historic Drama'. However, in surviving correspondence from the year of the play's composition, Coleridge refers to it six times as a 'tragedy' and never at all as 'historic'.¹⁵ Robert Southey, who composed the latter two acts, also refers to the play as a 'tragedy'.¹⁶

It is possible that Coleridge decided against publishing *Robespierre* as a 'tragedy' because, as Geoffrey Brereton observes, 'the tragic element in the fates of historic characters depends on whether one is "for" or "against" them.'¹⁷ To interpret the events of the play as 'tragic', therefore, would declare Coleridge's support for Robespierre, risking unwanted controversy. However, Coleridge and Southey's support for Robespierre is evident in the text regardless of title. As Jim Mays notes, the play's dedication to Henry Martin, a Unitarian at Cambridge, recalls the name of the Henry Marten who signed King Charles's death sentence; this does not indicate authors who shy from expressing radical views.¹⁸ Hence, there is evidence that Coleridge wishes for *The Fall of Robespierre* to be understood both as a tragedy and a historic drama.

The implications of 'history' and 'tragedy' as literary classifications are inexact in Coleridge's writing, as they were in his time. Neither the specification of—nor the distinction between—the genres is clear. However, it is common to assume that a history play prioritises the narration of 'historical process', while a tragedy emphasises the evocation of pathos.¹⁹ Where a tragedy's subject is historical, fictional elements may be introduced, such as the daemons of Aeschylus' *Persians* (c. 472 BCE). In Coleridge's works, the author's inventions are imposed onto actual events to evoke tragic pathos.

¹³ Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*, repr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 85.

¹⁴ Lects 1795 7.

¹⁵ CL I 98, 102, 104, 106, 110, 121.

¹⁶ *New Letters*, I, p. 72.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy: A Rational Examination of the Tragic Concept in Life and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 19.

¹⁸ PW III.1. 9.

¹⁹ Michael Hattaway, 'The Shakespearean History Play', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's History Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 3-23 (p. 14).

While real occurrences establish the relevance of Coleridge's subjects, the emotional force of the tragic is a tool of dissent, urging action.

In *The Fall of Robespierre* such a lesson is evident in the implied failure of the French Revolution exemplified by some questionable rhetoric.²⁰ In a speech that is typical of the play, Robespierre responds to Barrere's fears with *antirrhexis*, and the passage culminates with the use of an image of the 'tottering pillar' borrowed from Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671):

Self-centring Fear! how well thou canst ape Mercy!
 Too fond of slaughter!—matchless hypocrite!
 Thought Barrere so, when Brissot, Danton died?
 Thought Barrere so, when through the streaming streets
 Of Paris red-eyed Massacre o'er wearied
 Reel'd heavily, intoxicate with blood?
 And when (O heavens!) in Lyons' death-red square
 Sick fancy groan'd o'er putrid hills of slain,
 Didst thou not fiercely laugh, and bless the day?
 Why, thou hast been the mouth-piece of all horrors,
 And, like a blood-hound, crouch'd for murder! Now
 Aloof thou standest from the tottering pillar.
 (*The Fall of Robespierre*, I.168-79)

Robespierre's speech is an eloquent arrangement of such rhetorical devices as *apostrophe* (to 'Fear'), *erotema* ('thought Barrere so [...]?'), *truductio prosonomasia* (the phonetic repetition in 'so' and 'Brissot', 'groan'd' and 'o'er'), *zeugma* ('wearied') and oxymoron ('reel'd heavily'). Vacuous, rhetorical monologue exists where productive discussion should, typifying the inability or unwillingness of the politicians to communicate with each other and demonstrating the dissolution of community.²¹

In Coleridge's act of *The Fall of Robespierre*, the word 'patriot' undergoes similar variations. Robespierre's brother indicates that the sections utter 'patriot' ironically to indicate the sophistry of Robespierre, the 'tyrant guardian of the country's freedom' (I.111-12). To Couthon, 'patriot' implies 'pomp' (I.125). Robespierre himself understands a 'virtuous patriot' as one to whom violence is 'light'; such a person will commit atrocity willingly (I.156). Consequently, 'patriot' varies sufficiently in its implications to become meaningless, weakening the foundations of revolutionary discourse, and establishing rhetoric itself as a tragic theme in the drama.

Paul Deschamps suggests that Coleridge's concern in *The Fall of Robespierre* with the vacuity of political tenets not only attacks Robespierre's regime, but

²⁰ For instance, see comments by Edward Kessler, *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 125, and Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, repr (London: Flamingo, 1999), p. 74.

²¹ The concept of empty rhetoric signifying tragic discord is consistent with Gregory Dart's claim that *The Fall of Robespierre* is 'a modern version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*'. Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 171.

also Godwin's advocacy of cold reason and the suppression of emotion.²² This view accords with Coleridge's sentiments in a letter of 1794:

Reasoning is but *words* unless where it derives force from the repeated experience of the person, to whom it is addressed.—*How* can we ensure their silence concerning *God* &c—? Is it possible, *they* should enter into our *motives* for this silence? If not we must produce their *obedience* by *Terror*. *Obedience? Terror?* The Repetition is sufficient—I need not inform you, that they are as inadequate as inapplicable.²³

Coleridge's letter discusses pedagogical practices for imparting a love of reason to children. Tragedy, to Coleridge, has an educative function, but *The Fall of Robespierre* risks becoming 'but *words*', exemplifying the principles that Coleridge opposes rather than criticising them. Hence, it is necessary to relate the play's events to 'the repeated experience of the person[s], to whom it is addressed'; the audience. This is accomplished using the character of Adelaide, the only fictional person in *The Fall of Robespierre*. As a woman, Adelaide is excluded from participation in politics, and becomes an external commentator on the politicians. Adelaide represents the restricted masses, and her lamentation marks the transition of *The Fall of Robespierre* from historical drama to tragedy.

Adelaide's frustrated correspondence with Tallien anticipates a complaint whose implication is expanded—beyond the inability of lovers to communicate—to a broader allegory of society in discord, in which the concerns of representative figures of the 'father' and the 'mother' are disregarded.²⁴ Ultimately, Adelaide claims that France has abandoned reason:

O this new freedom! at how dear a price
We've bought the seeming good! The peaceful virtues
And every blandishment of private life,
The father's cares, the mother's fond endearment,
All sacrificed to liberty's wild riot.
The winged hours, that scatter'd roses around me,
Languid and sad drag their slow course along,
And shake big gall-drops from their heavy wings.
(I.198-205)

Adelaide's speech recalls the tradition of the captive woman's lamentation, prevalent in Greek tragedy. Tragic lamentation recurs in Coleridge's *Osorio* (1797), in which Alhadra recalls captivity, imposed on her by the 'Holy Brethren', the Spanish Inquisition (I.i.206):

²² Paul Deschamps, *La Formation de la Pensée de Coleridge* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1964), p. 348.

²³ CL I 120.

²⁴ The antecedent for this scene occurs in *Hamlet* (1623). Hamlet declines to accept returned 'remembrances' from Ophelia, who infers that 'a noble mind is here o'erthrown', intimating that the prince's irrationality typifies a dysfunctional Danish court (III.1.92, 149).

They cast me then a young and nursing Mother
 Into a dungeon of their Prison-house.
 There was no bed, no fire, no ray of Light,
 No touch, no sound of comfort! The black air—
 It was a toil to breathe it! I have seen
 The Gaoler's Lamp, the moment that he enter'd
 How the flame sunk at once down to the Socket.
 O miserable, by that Lamp to see
 My infant quarreling with the coarse hard bread
 Brought daily: for the little wretch was sickly,
 My rage had dried away it's natural food.
 In darkness I remain'd counting the clocks,
 Which haply told me that the blessed Sun
 Was rising on my garden.

(*Osorio*, I.i.208-221)

Coleridge employs Adelaide and Alhadra to provide sympathetic referents for political contexts; both fictional characters translate historical events into human terms to evoke the tragic. Adelaide's allusion to the sacrifice of 'the father's cares, the mother's fond endearment' indicates not only the Revolutionaries' incorrect priorities, but also that the nuclear family, the unit of society, is threatened by the Terror. Adelaide warns of impending anarchy. Alhadra exemplifies the persecution of Muslims in sixteenth-century Spain. However, Coleridge departs from the tradition of the captive woman's lamentation: it is clear Adelaide and Alhadra undergo ideological imprisonment rather than bondage. Adelaide's desire for peace has alienated her from politicians and the populace, whom she terms 'the tyrant's creatures' and 'confusion's lawless sons' respectively (I.244, 249). In *Osorio*, Alhadra explains that she has formerly been imprisoned on suspicion of heresy. She has been released, but must pretend that she is a Christian, although it is a religion of which Alhadra is critical: 'they never do pardon—tis their Faith!' (I.i.202).

Contemporary comments on lamenting in *The Fall of Robespierre* and *Osorio* indicate their transparency to their audiences: the lamentations are understood to be political, and their social commentary is transferable to Britain. In a letter of 1794, Coleridge admits that the character of Adelaide is overburdened as a medium for the author's personal views; he terms her an '*Automaton*'.²⁵ A similar conclusion is reached concerning Alhadra by George Bellas Greenough, who writes on a manuscript of *Osorio*, next to Alhadra's speech, 'Does not Alhadra account for this rather too philosophically?'²⁶ It is clear that, although Coleridge provides defined historical-contexts for both plays, they are coded attacks on restrictions of expression in Pitt's Britain. This is a subject to which Coleridge returns repeatedly, in allegoric and explicit criticisms of Britain, with a concern that repression might lead to such domestic catastrophe as occurred

²⁵ CL I 125.

²⁶ Quoted in PW III.1 153.

abroad. In a letter commenting on how 'sadly' the Polish revolution proceeds, Coleridge anticipates all of Europe following France to lasting unrest.²⁷

Like *The Fall of Robespierre*, the 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' ostensibly takes as its subject the death of an eminent person, but assigns tragic significance by relating individual failure to broader, social problems. The 'Monody' also achieves this purpose by introducing fictional elements and sustaining a tone of lamentation. Coleridge's treatment of Thomas Chatterton's death in his 'Monody' departs from what John Axcelson terms 'the tragedy of Chatterton himself' towards the 'symbol of Chatterton as tragedy'.²⁸ Chatterton's early death 'keep[s] him a boy', as David Fairer observes, and 'shut[s] off his politico-satirical side and exploit[s] the lyricism and sentiment instead'.²⁹ This abstraction of Chatterton's youth and melancholy death gives rise to Wordsworth's 'marvellous boy' and to Keats's 'child of sorrow' ('Resolution and Independence', l. 43; 'To Chatterton', l. 2). In Chatterton's isolation, and the later implication in the 'Monody' that the populace lacks representation, Coleridge's tragic motif of ideological imprisonment recurs, indicating his preoccupation with the theme of restricted expression.

While Coleridge's 'Monody' is inflected with the same anxiety of a poet identifying himself with his unfortunate subject, versions of the poem from 1794 onwards articulate a relationship to Chatterton that differs from Wordsworth's and Keats's significantly. Rather than employing the image of the solitary poet to shut off Chatterton's 'politico-satirical side', Coleridge exploits the radical themes of Chatterton's poetry to assist him in expressing his own social concerns. The description of Chatterton's suicide emphasises that he is a subversive figure by recalling the death of Socrates:

CARE, of wither'd brow,
Prepar'd the poison's death-cold power:
Already to thy lips was raised the bowl.
(68-70)

Chatterton was believed to have intended suicide, and Coleridge depicts him as a passive figure, evoking Socrates' acceptance of the bowl of hemlock. Chatterton's re-enactment of Socrates' death implies a resignation to civic pressure rather than melancholy, as Socrates' sham trial and death was demanded by the tyrants who controlled Athens. Additionally, Chatterton's death repeats the expulsion of wisdom signified by Socrates' death sentence.

Socrates provides a useful model for Coleridge's presentation of Chatterton as a potential benefactor to mankind. The poem's establishment of Chatterton as a literary, and specifically a British, tragic figure is predicated

²⁷ CL I 86.

²⁸ John Axcelson, 'Saving Chatterton: Imagining Historical Transmissions in Coleridge', in *The Wordsworth Circle* 36:3 (2005), 126-33 (p. 126).

²⁹ David Fairer, 'Chatterton's Poetic Afterlife: A Context for Coleridge's *Monody*', in *Thomas Chatterton and Romantic Culture*, ed. by Nick Groom (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), pp. 228-52 (p. 229).

upon a complex system of invocation and the assumption of masks, by which Coleridge becomes Chatterton, and Chatterton becomes his own Ælla/Ella. The conventional, idiomatic comparison of pen to sword allows Chatterton to assume the identity of Ælla, the champion of liberty: 'her own iron rod he makes Oppression feel' (47). Four lines place particular emphasis on Chatterton as a social figure whose loss is tragic:

Friend to the friendless, to the sick man health,
 With generous joy he views th'*ideal* wealth;
 He hears the widow's heaven-breathed prayer of praise;
 He marks the sheltered orphan's tearful gaze.
 (41-44)

Ælla's suicide in *Ælla: A Tragycal Enterlude; or Discourseynge Tragedy* (1769) assists comparison with Chatterton, but the implication that Chatterton's Wilkite politics and locally-controversial character attacks in verse are equivalent to the violent heroism of Ælla is unconvincing. This is because the lines were not composed for Chatterton. With little modification, Coleridge took the passage from an 'Epistle' that he reported inscribing on the window-shutters of an inn that was once home to John Kyrle (1637-1724), known to Coleridge as the 'Man of Ross', in July 1794.³⁰ Hence, the 1794 'Monody' adapts Chatterton to a pre-existing anxiety of community lacking representation, the same theme that occurs in *The Fall of Robespierre*, whose eponym, like Chatterton, is doomed.

As in *The Fall of Robespierre* and *Osorio*, the 'Monody' blends fact and fiction to evoke tragic pathos, but also foregrounds Coleridge's political concerns; Adelaide, Chatterton and Alhadra each become an '*Automaton*' for Coleridge's dissent. Throughout 1794, Coleridge continues to search a champion for liberty where Kyrle, Chatterton and Robespierre have failed. Thomas Erskine, who made efforts to have the treason charges against The London Twelve dropped, is the subject of one of Coleridge's poems in his series of *Sonnets on Eminent Characters*. The poem, published in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1794, places pressure on Erskine to be immortalised as a hero, evoking the *pietas* of Aeneas, and thereby creating a Republican subtext, with his use of religious language:

dreadless thou didst stand
 (Thy censer glowing with hallow'd flame)
 An hireless Priest before the insulted shrine.
 ("To the Honourable Mr Erskine", ll. 4-6)

Erskine will be venerated in for his 'stream divine | Of unmatched eloquence', but there is no indication of achievement following his bravery. Instead, the poem's closing image of the posthumous hero's radiance intimates glorious

³⁰ CL I 87.

failure rather than progress. Similarly, Coleridge assumes a lamenting tone as he depicts the Polish revolutionary Thaddeus Kosciusko (1746-1817) as a martyr to the cause of freedom from Russia and Prussia:

O what a loud and fearful shriek was there,
 As tho' a thousand souls one death-groan pour'd!
 Ah me! they view'd beneath an hireling sword
 Fall'n KOSKIUSKO!

(Sonnet: 'To Kosciusko', ll. 1-4)

Coleridge depicts the site of the rebel's death as 'the dirge of murder'd Hope'. In fact Kosciusko had not been killed, but wounded and captured (8). In a 1796 article in *The Watchman*, Coleridge corrects his misconception that Kosciusko died in 1794.³¹ Although Coleridge later modifies the sonnet stylistically, it remains erroneous factually in the four editions of his poems in which it appears during his lifetime, the last in 1834. Evidently, Coleridge tolerates, or requires, factual inaccuracy in the evocation of tragic pathos.

The sonnets on Erskine and Kosciusko articulate wasted genius, like the disappointments of Robespierre and Chatterton, provoking the question of what solution is available to humanity. Tragic reality serves as propaganda to Coleridge, whose literary works and correspondence in 1794 imply repeatedly that the answer to civilisation's difficulties is a society founded upon newly-defined humanitarian principles. The tragic is not articulated solely as a disillusioned portrait of the age, but as a stimulant, as Coleridge's inspiration to devise a means of social improvement, and a mode that he hopes will encourage others to do likewise.

In 1795, Coleridge's use of tragedy to attack Pitt's government becomes increasingly explicit and earnest, particularly in response to the two 'Gagging Acts' of November 1795, which prohibited gatherings of over fifty people and deemed treasonous any publication that was critical of the government or the monarch. To these acts Coleridge replies with a published lecture, *The Plot Discovered, or an Address to the People Against Ministerial Treason*, which owes its title to Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved; or, A Plot Discovered* (1682). The association of Pitt's cabinet with Otway's play, in which a suspected conspiracy is found to have been fabricated by governmental conspirators, attacks the 'Gagging Acts' by suggesting that their supporters must be untrustworthy.

As in his depictions of the isolated Adelaide and Chatterton, Coleridge's lectures articulate as tragic his concerns that the masses lack representation. Coleridge identifies as an error that the 'King is regarded as the voice and will of the people.'³² This discussion of a people silenced culminates in a quotation from Euripides' *The Suppliant Women* (c. 420 BCE) in which Theseus, king of Athens, explains that freedom of speech benefits society: 'Liberty speaks in

³¹ *Watchman* 367-69.

³² *Ibid.*, 295.

these words: "Who with good counsel for his city wishes to address this gathering?" Anyone who wishes to do this gains distinction; whoever does not keeps silent.³³ The quotation serves two purposes. Ostensibly, it demonstrates that Coleridge fears the tyranny of politicians, but he also believes that the masses' inability to participate in politics might result in the mental atrophy of the populace. This, to Coleridge, is catastrophic, as it is to ignorance that he attributes violence in France.³⁴ The danger is domestic because, Coleridge claims, the British government conspires to maintain widespread ignorance so that people might work like beasts.³⁵ The second function of the quotation is to assist Coleridge's self-identification with another dissenting tragic-poet: Milton uses the same lines from *The Suppliant Women* as the epigram to his *Areopagitica* (1644). Coleridge demonstrates that the collapse of French society is a tragic plight by quoting from *Samson Agonistes*:

With horrible convulsion to and fro,
They tugg'd, they shook—till down they came and drew
The whole Roof after them with burst of Thunder
Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, and Priests,
Their choice Nobility!

(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1649-54, var.)

Coleridge implies that the blind Samson represents not a figure of authority, but the average citizen. This is typical of Coleridge's tragic poems and plays, whose referents are not always, in accordance with tragic tradition, rulers and heroes, but figures of lower social status, such as Adelaide and Alhadra.

In Coleridge's works, the 'extension' of tragedy to include 'the citizen' relates to 'bourgeois revolution' both as a consequence and as a causative:³⁶ the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution allow Coleridge to include all people in the domain of the tragic, and in turn he uses the tragic to promote revolution in Britain. This is the 'bloodless' revolution by which, Coleridge hopes, British citizens would obtain equality and freedom of expression.

II: *Tragedy and Conservatism*

Coleridge's continuing use of the tragic to express concern about political affairs in Europe is evident in his series of articles on Mary of Buttermere for the *Morning Post* and the *Courier* in 1802. In October 1802, Mary Robinson, a waitress at her parents' inn, married 'a Gentleman, calling himself Alexander

³³ Euripides, *The Suppliant Women*, in *Electra and Other Plays*, trans by John Dowie (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 106.

³⁴ Lects 1795 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁶ See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 49: 'As in other bourgeois revolutions, extending the categories of law or suffrage, the arguments for the limited extension became inevitable arguments for a general extension. The extension from the prince to the citizen became in practice an extension to all human beings.'

Augustus Hope [...] and brother to the Earl of Hopeton.³⁷ Within weeks of the wedding, the bridegroom was revealed to be an impostor named Hatfield. Convicted of forgery, Hatfield was hanged at Carlisle in September 1803.

Coleridge's first article on the Buttermere episode appears in the *Morning Post* in October 1802 under the title of 'Romantic Marriage'. At the time of publication it was not known that Hatfield was an impostor, but suspicions concerning his identity existed in the Kewswick community. Hence, Coleridge's piece assumes a method that will allow it to be read retrospectively as tragic if Hatfield is found to be a fraud, but romantic if he is not. This technique is predicated on the presentation of Mary. Initially, Coleridge dispels the popular conception of Mary's great beauty: 'she is rather gap-toothed, and somewhat pock-fretten', in accordance with De Quincey's account, which states that '*beautiful*, in any emphatic sense, she was not.'³⁸ De Quincey also comments that Mary is ill-tempered, and that admiration of her 'roused anger and disdain'.³⁹ However, despite his recommendation that Mary might be better known as 'the *Grace* of Buttermere, rather than the Beauty', Coleridge decides that it better suits his purpose of evoking pathos to present Mary as attractive, as in the same paragraph he indicates 'her exquisite elegance, and the becoming manner in which she is used to fillet her beautiful long hair'.⁴⁰

At the time of Coleridge's next four articles on the Buttermere scandal, Hatfield had been confirmed as an impostor. Recognising in his own view of the episode a resemblance to a viewer of art, Coleridge presents his treatment of Hatfield's story as *ekphrasis*, an account of a 'novel of real life'.⁴¹ Subsequently, a notebook entry claims that 'Hatfield—Cruikshank—Πηνελοπη' will be 'characters in my novel.'⁴² Coleridge sets about defining Mary and Hatfield in a tragic opposition, as simplified characters representing good and evil. Hatfield 'paid serious addresses to four women at the same time,' 'made light' of his charge with forgery, and 'never attended the church at Keswick but once.'⁴³ In a letter of 1804 Coleridge presents such a wrongdoer is a chameleon: 'There are HATFIELDS—& likewise there are IAGOS—Whatever shape Vice can assume, Virtue will counterfeit.'⁴⁴ The word 'counterfeit', used by Milton to describe Satan's infiltration of heaven, equates Hatfield with the arch-fiend (*Paradise Lost*, IV.117). This accords with Coleridge's summation of Hatfield's correspondence: 'never surely did an equal number of letters disclose a thicker swarm of villainies perpetrated by one of the worst, and miseries inflicted on some of the best, of human beings.'⁴⁵

³⁷ EoT I 357.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lake Poets*, ed. by Edward Sackville-West (London: The Chiltern Library, 1948), p. 60.

³⁹ EoT I 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 357, my italics.

⁴¹ EoT I 374.

⁴² CN I 1395.

⁴³ EoT I 374, 375, 409.

⁴⁴ CL II 1121.

⁴⁵ EoT I 415.

Coleridge insists that the Buttermere episode is of national importance. By broadening the scope of the incident to imply that the entire nation is affected, Coleridge presents Hatfield's crime as a phallic intrusion to spoil a virgin community rather than the deception of one woman alone; Hatfield's actions become invasive.⁴⁶ I believe that this characterises Coleridge's changing approach to the tragic, that his evocation of the tragic in depictions of real life no longer urges governmental reform, but recommends a cautious and pragmatic approach to catastrophe.

Peter Kitson observes that 'it is not easy to date the beginning of Coleridge's passage from idiosyncratic dissenter to idiosyncratic conservative.'⁴⁷ While this transition may elude specification, Coleridge's signalling of it is sudden. Coleridge's public attitude to France is markedly different following the French defeat of the Swiss at Berne in 1798. The French victory signalled the nation's aspiration to build an empire, a goal incompatible with the humanitarian principles that Coleridge formerly admired in Revolutionary discourse. Coleridge becomes critical of France, dismissing his previous support for France as erroneous. In 'France: An Ode', first published under the telling title of 'The Recantation', Coleridge attacks French foreign policy:

Was this thy boast, champion of human kind!
To mix with Monarchs in the lust of sway,
Yell in the hunt, and share the murd'rous prey—
T' insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils
From freemen torn! to tempt and to betray!
(*'France: An Ode'*, ll. 80-84)

Coleridge's recantation is necessary because, he claims, the task of France was not to conquer, but to 'persuade the nations to be free' (l. 61). In 'Fears in Solitude', Coleridge's disappointment develops into an apprehension that England will be invaded, and that it is a fate that is deserved as retribution for Britain's war on France: 'Therefore, evil days | Are coming on us, O my countrymen!' ('Fears in Solitude', ll. 124-25).

While earlier tragic writings urge political action, Coleridge displays a fear of political upheaval in works following *Osorio*. Coleridge realises that to threaten the structure of society invites chaos and catastrophe. The philosopher René Girard reaches the same conclusion, and illustrates his point with a passage from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in which Ulysses indicates the dangerous consequences of changes in 'Degree' or social status (I.iii.101-110ff).⁴⁸ Even 'bloodless' revolution requires a total upheaval of society to accord to Coleridge's system of Pantisocracy, and it is evident that this could not occur without disorder. Hence, he uses the tragic to warn against

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁴⁷ Peter Kitson, 'Political Thinker', in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. by Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 156-69 (p. 164).

⁴⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans by Patrick Gregory, repr (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 52.

revolutionary change, not to incite it.

In examining the tragic aspects of Coleridge's Buttermere articles, several events are significant as context. As Coleridge's articles were written shortly after Wordsworth's wedding, it is possible to detect irony in Coleridge's treatment of 'Romantic Marriage' at the expense of his colleague. Coleridge was also devoting considerable attention to his interest in Greek tragedy in the autumn of 1802. In August 1802 Coleridge writes to William Sotheby in anticipation of a copy of *Orestes*, Sotheby's version of Euripides' *Electra*: "The newest subject [...] could not excite my curiosity more than *Orestes*."⁴⁹ Coleridge suggests that Sotheby writes a tragedy on the character of Medea:

There is a subject of great merit in the ancient mythology hitherto untouched [...], it is one of the finest subjects for tragedy that I am acquainted with—Medea after the murder of her children fled to the Court of the old King, Pelias, was regarded with superstitious Horror, & shunned and insulted by the Daughters of Pelias—till hearing of her miraculous Restoration of Æson they conceived the idea of recalling by her means the youth of their own Father. She avails herself of their credulity—& so works them up by pretended magic Rites, and they consent to kill their Father in his sleep, & throw him into the magic Cauldron—which done, Medea leaves them with bitter Taunts & triumph.⁵⁰

By proceeding to quote from Medea's lamenting letter to Jason in Ovid's *Heroides*, Coleridge poses a rhetorical question concerning the relevance of Medea's tale:

Why tell again of the daughters of Pelias, doing evil through devotion
And hacking their father's limbs with maiden hands?
(Ovid, *Heroides* XII.129-30, trans)

The answer, Coleridge implies, is the continued relevance of tragic art to reality. The letter to Sotheby not only adumbrates literary influences on Coleridge's Buttermere articles, but evinces a method of articulating the tragic that is evident in Coleridge's continuation of 'The Three Graves' and his *Wallenstein* translation.

Repeatedly, catastrophe occurs as a consequence of violations of 'degree' or social order in Coleridge's writings. Primarily this is evident as a xenophobic wariness: Hatfield, a newcomer to Keswick, is the object of suspicion even prior to confirmation of his crimes. Like Medea and Orestes, the foreign Hatfield is inherently threatening. If Hatfield is, as he claims, Alexander Augustus Hope, his intended marriage to the lowly Mary transcends class structures in a manner that alarms Coleridge. When Medea, a princess,

⁴⁹ CL II 857.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

arrives in Corinth, her status is lowered to that of a barbarian, and Jason's desire to marry a Corinthian princess initiates the tragedy of Euripides' play. In Sotheby's (and all versions of) *Orestes*, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus' attempt to assume monarchical control through adultery and murder incurs catastrophe. Coleridge can only accept Hope's marriage to Mary Robinson by negating their class division, which is accomplished, in a manner that anticipates Coleridge's own *Zapolya* (1817), with an unsubstantiated suggestion that Mary is of noble origin: 'It seems that there are some circumstances attending her birth and *true parentage*, which would account for her striking superiority in mind, and manners.'⁵¹ As Hope is an impostor, he attempts to violate social order, and catastrophe follows. Similarly, in the continuation of 'The Three Graves' and the translations of *Wallenstein*, tragedy arises from the defiance of unjust authority, and transgressions of 'degree' are committed. In the ballad, Mary's mother desires her daughter's lover, and in the *Wallenstein* plays, the eponym refuses the Emperor's order to return to battle.

Coleridge uses the occult, by which natural law is transcended, to accentuate the violation of social order occurring in 'The Three Graves' and *Wallenstein*, recalling Medea's association with witchcraft. In Coleridge's portion of the ballad, the effects of the mother's curse are seen, and she utters a second imprecation on Ellen. The curses succeed due to the confusion of natural order. As a mother should be virtuous, it is assumed that her prayers will be answered, as she should not pray for what is not just:

Beneath the foulest Mother's curse
 No child could ever thrive:
 A Mother is a Mother still,
 The holiest thing alive.
 ('Continuation of *The Three Graves*', ll. 37-40)

For Wordsworth, Coleridge's tragic elaboration of the tale renders it unpalatable: 'he made it too shrieking and painful, and not sufficiently sweetened by any healing views.'⁵² In the context of a religious war, *Wallenstein*'s preoccupation with astrology and the supernatural emphasises his variance from the will of the Holy Roman Emperor. In Coleridge's rendering of *The Piccolomini*, he expands one of *Wallenstein*'s soliloquys with an implication that his refusal to obey orders is directly related to occult interests:

No road, no track behind me, but a wall,
 Impenetrable, insurmountable,
 Rises obedient to the spells I mutter'd
 And meant not—my own doings tower behind me.
 (*The Piccolomini*, IV.iv.22-25)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, I 376, my italics.

⁵² Barron Field, *Memoirs of Wordsworth*, ed. by Geoffrey Little (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1975), p. 100.

As in 'The Three Graves', the folly of pursuing occult interests signals the character's unnatural desires, and that these threaten the structure of society. Thus, Coleridge makes a judgement of Wallenstein as a historical character, emphasising that he is tragically misguided.

Wallenstein's decline also prophecies the downfall of Napoleon, about whom Coleridge contributed a series of articles for the *Morning Post* in March 1800, when he was also translating Schiller's plays. The anxiety concerning political upheaval in Coleridge's versions of the *Wallenstein* plays expresses his concern that the French monarchy should be restored without 'a revolution of property'.⁵³ Like Wallenstein, Napoleon is 'a man of various talent, of commanding genius, of splendid exploit.'⁵⁴ Coleridge also fears that Napoleon possesses an impractical idealism; this informs his depiction of Wallenstein: 'Too intensely preoccupied to be otherwise than austere in morals; too confident in his predestined fortune to be suspicious or cruel; too ambitious of a new greatness for the ordinary ambition of conquest or despotism.'⁵⁵

By 1810 Coleridge's conservatism has advanced sufficiently to criticise France with the name 'Miseses' ('hater') and praise Britain as 'Pamphilus' ('Loved by All').⁵⁶ However, both in tragic and non-tragic writings Coleridge's exhortation against uprising becomes consistent; a passage in *The Friend* accounts Coleridge's passage from 'foul bye roads of ordinary fanaticism' as a youth to an appreciation of 'common sense'. It is common sense to which Coleridge's tragic writings appeal following *Osorio* and his abandonment of Pantisocracy.⁵⁷ This is evident in Coleridge's epistolary musings on Robert Emmet, who, Coleridge believes with some naivety, could have grown to love Britain with ministerial encouragement: 'O if our Minsters had saved him [...] we *might* have had in him a sublimely great man, we assuredly should have had in him a good man, heart & soul an *Englishman*'⁵⁸ Coleridge proposes that tragedy would cure Emmet; that a vision of the consequences of uprising would alter his aspirations and methods.⁵⁹

Coleridge frequently indicates that ignorance is a social problem of which tragic art is curative; this concept remains consistent in his works: 'The Happiness & Misery of a nation must ultimately be traced to the morals and & understandings of the People.'⁶⁰ While early writings suggest revolution as a means to ending ignorance, later works reverse the vision: mankind's improvement must occur on an individual level, with political reform occurring consequentially and peacefully. To impart this visionary didacticism, Coleridge uses various literary forms, but in each he represents history as a dramatic process that at its worst plays out tragic forces in warnings to humanity.

⁵³ EoT I 208.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁶ *The Friend* I 304.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁸ CL II 522.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1003.

⁶⁰ CL II 720.