

**Heidi Thomson, *Coleridge and the Romantic Newspaper: The Morning Post and the Road to 'Dejection'*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2016. Pp. 274. £72.00. ISBN 9783319319773.**

In *Coleridge and the Romantic Newspaper*, Heidi Thomson analyzes Coleridge's life and writing between November 1799, when he established himself in London as a staff writer for Daniel Stuart's newspaper, *The Morning Post*, and October 1802, when he published 'Dejection: An Ode' in the same newspaper on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, the day of Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson. Coleridge's relations during this period with the Wordsworths and the Hutchinsons have received a great deal of critical attention, but Thomson's premiss is original and revelatory. Rather than study a group of people, she here examines a collection of writings – Coleridge's epigrams, ballads, sentimental poems, satires, odes, translations, and political essays in the *Morning Post* – as a way to interrogate the underlying tensions of Coleridge's life at this time, in particular his alienation from and envy of Wordsworth, as well as his anguished love for Sara Hutchinson and his emotional withdrawal from his wife, Sara Coleridge. In Thomson's reading, Coleridge not only exploited the public forum of the newspaper for the airing of remarkably private grievances, but in doing so wrote some of his best poetry. Her narrative culminates in 1802 with 'Dejection', but on the way there she provides fascinating, insightful readings of any number of Coleridge's newspaper poems (including the 'Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie', the odes 'To Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire' and 'After Bathing in the Sea, Contrary to Medical Advice', as well as 'The Mad Monk'), persuasively arguing that Coleridge's popular newspaper poetry provides 'the clearest, most revealing indication of his private thoughts and emotions' (32).

Writing for the newspaper provided Coleridge with a 'socially sanctioned outlet for private despair about domestic and poetic matters' (21). He turned to the *Morning Post* almost compulsively during these years, Thomson argues, 'to publish matters of an extraordinarily sensitive personal nature in the unambiguously public space of the newspaper' (3). The story that she narrates here takes important bearings from Coleridge's increasingly strained relations with Wordsworth, notably during the preparation of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 (culminating in Wordsworth's rejection of 'Christabel'). Always overestimating the alignment of Wordsworth's interests with his own, Coleridge was repeatedly forced both to acknowledge that Wordsworth's (increasingly naturalistic) poetics were no longer commensurate with his own, and to face his nagging anxiety that his own poetic demise was related directly to 'Wordsworth's descent on him' (lamenting to Godwin in 1801 that 'the Poet is dead in me'; 122). The other major factor in Coleridge's life at this time was of course his tortured relationship with Sara Hutchinson, whom he had met in the fall of 1799 just before moving to London, and with whom he was very much in love. Coleridge requested Stuart to send the *Morning Post* to Sara Hutchinson, which allowed them to use the newspaper as a private conduit, not least because Sara would have read Coleridge's poetry in ways that would have eluded other readers. Thus it is that, for Thomson, Coleridge's contributions to the *Morning Post* inevitably turn upon 'his disaffection from his wife, his alienation from the Wordsworths, and his guilty happiness with Sara Hutchinson' (128-9) – respectively figures for Coleridge of doomed domesticity, poetic prowess, and frustrated desire.

Amongst many fine readings of Coleridge's poetry here – notably the analysis of the 'Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie' (the first of the 'Asra' poems) in chapter 3 and the clinching reading of 'Dejection' in chapter 9 – Thomson arguably makes her most original

contribution in her analysis in chapters 6 and 7 of Coleridge's important relationship with Mary Robinson, his colleague at the *Morning Post* who became a close friend and ally in 1800, and whose *Lyrical Tales* he advocated for even as he was being erased from *Lyrical Ballads*. Thomson reads Coleridge's alliance with Robinson as 'both an antidote to and an advertisement of the dejection and rejection he experienced at the hands of the Wordsworths, and by extension also the Hutchinsons' (142). The central poems here are Coleridge's 'The Mad Monk', which Thomson positions as an immediate expression of Coleridge's 'disaffection from Wordsworth and hurt about the exclusion of "Christabel" from *Lyrical Ballads*' (145), and Robinson's own poems of 1800, the 'Ode to Derwent' and 'Mrs. Robinson to the Poet Coleridge', in which Robinson demonstrates her nuanced affinity for Coleridge's poetry.

Despite his marginalization by Wordsworth, 'Coleridge flourished as a poet, a very different poet from Wordsworth, during his *Morning Post* years' (236), a period during which he wrote some of his most popular poetry, and certainly poetry whose readership far outnumbered that of the *Lyrical Ballads*. This is Thomson's largest claim, one which she generously substantiates, in subtle and revealing readings of Coleridge's unduly neglected newspaper poetry – as well as of 'Dejection', which was itself, as Thomson reminds us, a newspaper poem.

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