The Structure of Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion*, *A Fairy Tale*

Hilary Newman

ALTHOUGH SARA COLERIDGE'S *PHANTASMION, A FAIRY TALE* has been enjoyed by a number of readers over the decades, nobody has advanced serious claims for it as a work of literature. Dennis Low has summarized the critical response to *Phantasmion*:

> John Duke Coleridge notes that *Phantasmion* 'is nothing but a fairy tale; into which no moral is intruded… *Phantasmion* does not pretend to teach directly any moral lessons; it is not a sermon in disguise'. Griggs is of a similar opinion: '*Phantasmion*, like *The Ancient Mariner*, has no end but pleasure, and Sara was frankly puzzled by her critics' attempts to discover some allegorical significance in her story'. Mona Wilson is of the opinion that 'The story was in some sort of protest against the moral tales of Maria Edgeworth' and Towle notes in her chapter on *Phantasmion* that, 'Many of the books issued, whether of a moral or evangelical type were distasteful to [Sara]' and goes on to write about how *Phantasmion* lacked 'general purpose and meaning'.[1]

This article will argue that *Phantasmion* has a definite structure despite its apparent diffuseness, and that this structure embodies a moral purpose, which is to teach the importance of a certain type of marriage. Of *Phantasmion* Sara Coleridge wrote that though in her fairy tale, as in the genre generally, 'the ostensible moral, even if there be one, is not the author's chief aim and end', it still 'treats of human hopes, and fears, and passions, and interests, and of those changeful events and varying circumstances to which human life is liable'.[2] In *Phantasmion* this particularly involves the treatment of adult heterosexual relationships between the ruling families, in all their varieties, and across all the different ages of the protagonists. There are many marriages in *Phantasmion*, but there are even more love triangles in the fairy tale which will resolve themselves into the 'right' sort of matrimony. In biographical terms, Sara Coleridge may have had her own parents' unhappy marriage in mind.

In *Phantasmion*, the love triangles of the older generation are often based on ambition, rank, money and parental authority. This eighteenth-century concept is rejected in the cross generational marriages and those of the younger generation. The family trees on the following pages introduce the novel's characters and their relationships. Albinian, the common link through his two marriages, is placed side by side in the two charts.

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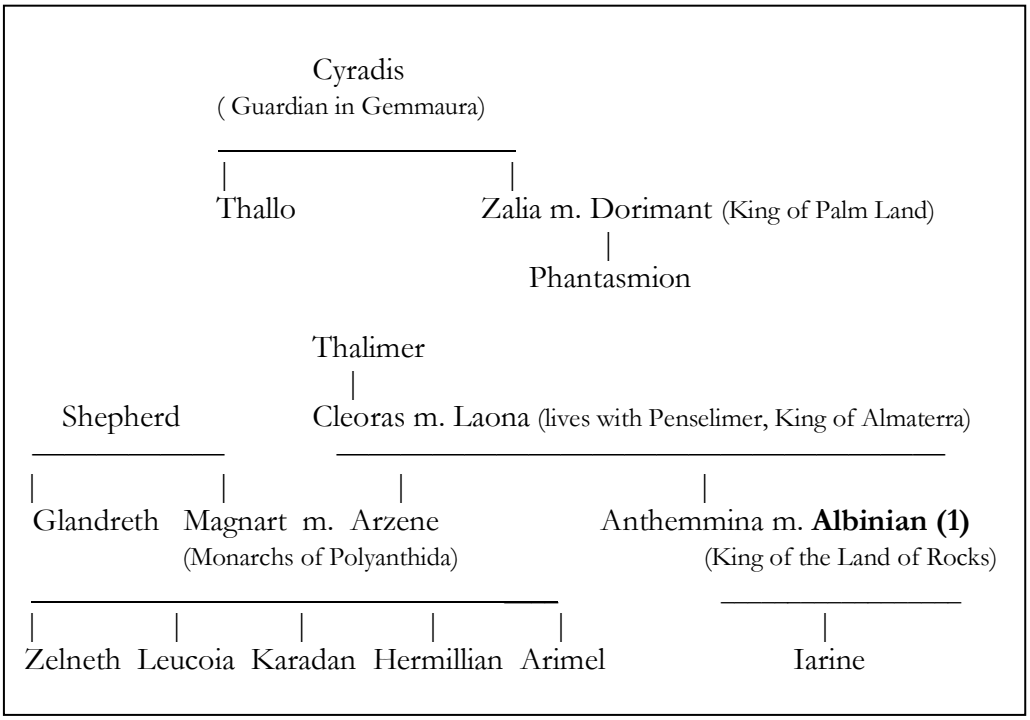
[1] Dennis Low 'The Very Way to Be *Not Read*: The Creative Significance of Literary Inconsequentiality in Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion*' in *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 12, Winter 1998, note 47.

[2] Sara Coleridge *Memoirs and Letters of Sara Coleridge* edited by her daughter [Edith Coleridge] Volume 1 Forgotten Books 2012 [1873], 191



Sara D Nyffenegger has made a distinction which is crucial to the love-relationships in *Phantasmion*:

> Marriages were previously [in the late eighteenth century] based on rank, money and parental control, but by the end of the century supposedly on romantic love and the companionate ideal […] The companionate ideal opted for an equal partnership, and it became more influential as individuality reigned among the Romantics. That ideal was based on the conception that marriage had something to do with personal happiness and should be founded on compatibility and love.[3]

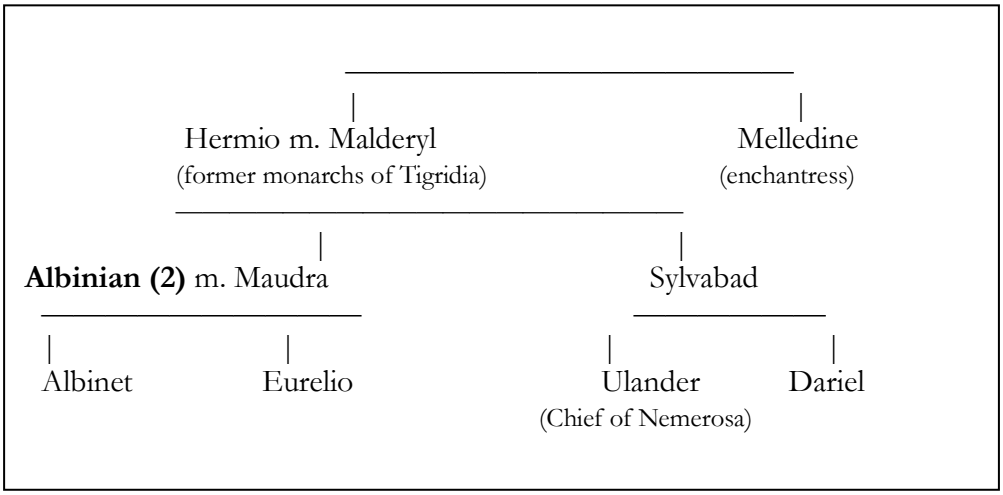
The younger characters opt for marriages based on personal esteem and affection. As befits a fairy tale, the different generations in *Phantasmion* are helped or hindered by supernatural forces. There are two good fairies, Potentilla and Feydeleen, but they are a little capricious and support different characters. However, towards the end of the tale these two endearing fairies agree to make a compact 'whereby all whom they both loved should in the end be gainers'.[4] There are also less benevolent supernatural forces at work in the world of *Phantasmion*: the entirely evil water spirit and enchantress Seshelma;

[3] Sara D Nyffenegger 'The Mirror, Friend or Foe? Sara Coleridge and the Effects of Society's Judgement on Female Appearance' in *The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series 33 Summer 2009, 89-90

[4] Sara Coleridge *Phantasmion, A Fairy Tale* Forgotten Books 2012 [1837]. All future references to this tale will be from this edition and will be inserted in brackets in the text.

Oloola, 'the spirit of the blast', and Valhorga, an 'earth spirit', both of whom are more ambiguous figures.

To begin the exploration of *Phantasmion* this article will first examine the love triangles between the older generation in the novel. The eponymous hero's parents, King Dorimant and Queen Zalia of Palm Land did not have a happy marriage. Dorimant cared only for his kingdom and its extension, and he let these ambitions dictate whom he married. Zalia's spirit appears to her



son towards the end of *Phantasmion*. She makes it apparent that Dorimant only married her because he thought her land, Gemmaura, was rich in metals and iron, which would enable him to make weapons for his army. With these, he intended to pursue the aggressive and illegal annexation of territories which he wished to add to his own dominions. However, he was never able to locate these reputed mines in Gemmaura. Their location is communicated to his son. Because Phantasmion is not engaged in aggression, but in a defensive war, Zalia and the earth spirit agree to guide him to these mines. This will enable the young King of Palm Land to defeat the evil brothers, Glandreth and Magnart.

Penselimer, King of Altamerra, had been involved in another love-triangle. His father tried to force him to marry Zalia himself, but Penselimer was already in love with Anthemmina. The latter returned his love and assured him that, as long as he held the mysterious silver pitcher, their marriage was certain. However, Anthemmina was then bewitched and transferred her affections to Dorimant. She tricked Penselimer out of the silver pitcher and presented it to Dorimant. Ambition then turned Dorimant's choice of a wife back to Zalia. Subsequently, Dorimant passed the silver pitcher to King Albinian of the Land of Rocks and Anthemmina reluctantly became his first wife (100-102).

Other Characters

Dorna, nurse of Anthemmina
Feydeleen, spirit of the flowers, fairy
Herva, dwarf
Leeliba, nurse of Phantasmion
Oloola 'spirit of the blast'
Potentilla, queen of the insects, fairy
Sanio, (regent of Almaterra during Penselimer's madness)
Seshelma, enchantress
Swartho, dwarf
Telza, nurse of Iarine
Valhorga, an 'earth spirit'

Love Triangles in *Phantasmion*
(Characters in italics are women)

Older Generation
Maudra — Glandreth — Albinian
Anthelmmina — Albinian — Dorimant
Anthelmmina — Penselimer — Albinian
Anthelmmina — Penselimer — Dorimant

Inter — Generational
Maudra — *Iarine* - Glandreth
Iarine — Phantasmion — Glandreth
Zelneth — Phantasmion — Penselimer
Iarine — Glandreth — Karadan

Younger Generation
Iarine — Phantasmion — Karadan
Iarine — Phantasmion — Ulander
Zelneth — Phantasmion — Ulander
Leucoia — Phantasmion — Ulander

For the majority of the tale most of the other characters (and the reader too) believe that Anthemmina is dead. Near the end of the fairy tale it is discovered that Anthemmina is still alive and Iarine, her daughter, is briefly reunited with her. It transpires that Anthemmina was involved in multiple love triangles. Although she was the wife of Albinian, she was still enamoured of Dorimant. At the same time, the humbly born Glandreth had sexual and marital designs on Anthemmina. He brought her to a barren island, purportedly so that she could be secretly visited by Dorimant, but actually so that Glandreth could hold her captive until she agreed to marry him. This she has always steadfastly refused to do, so has remained a prisoner on the island for many years,

presumed dead by most of the other characters.

Glandreth, an irredeemably evil character, has also been involved in multiple love triangles. Some time after Anthemmina's disappearance, he defeated the kingdom of Tigridia for King Albinian. Here, King Hermio and his son, Prince Sylvabad, were treacherously murdered by the invading Glandreth. Hermio and his queen, the sorceress Malderyl, had another child, a daughter called Maudra. She was infatuated with Glandreth and, 'enamoured of the blood-stained hero', followed him 'as a voluntary captive' (229). The phrase 'blood-stained hero' is surely used ironically. Neither can one think much of a woman who devotes herself to a man who has murdered her father and brother.

Glandreth and his mistress, Maudra, enchant Albinian into taking the former Tigridian princess as his second wife. When Iarine is with her dying father, King Albinian, he voices his regret that he refused his love to his first wife, Anthemmina, because she was in love with Dorimant. It is apparent that the dynastic reasons for marrying Anthemmina were insufficient to create a happy and fulfilling life for the two participants. He repents his second marriage, now realizing that sorcery was involved. Since his second marriage, his physical and mental health have both declined, and Maudra has ensured that her lover, Glandreth, is the actual ruler of the Land of Rocks in everything but name.

On his travels Phantasmion has heard that Glandreth and Maudra intend to mount the throne of the Land of Rocks after Albinian's death, and then to annex the eponymous hero's Palm Land to their own dominions (115). Phantasmion suggests to the ancient and wise Sanio, who is the regent of the kingdom of Altamerra while king Penselimer is insane, that they should form an alliance against the evil and ambitious Glandreth and Maudra. Sanio replies, 'If I were as young as Penselimer, and he as sane as I am, we might move faster in this enterprise' (115). The comparative youth of Penselimer is here stressed for a purpose, for he will make a marriage with one of the younger generation, when he recovers his sanity.

The inter-generational love-triangles reveal a mixture of motives. Glandreth enters into three love-triangles in this category. He is solely motivated by ambition and greed. Maudra, of the older generation, still nurtures her adulterous passion for Glandreth, but he is now desirous of marrying Iarine, King Albinian's daughter by his first marriage to Anthemmina. In making his courtship apparent, Glandreth has antagonized both his rivals from the younger generation: the eponymous hero Phantasmion, and Karadan, the elder son of King Magnart and Queen Arzene of Polyanthida.

The other intergenerational love-triangle will resolve itself into a happy marriage, as Penselimer marries Zelneth, who is one of the daughters of Magnart and Arzene. For much of the tale Zelneth cherishes an unrequited passion for Phantasmion. She encourages the evil sorceress to enchant him so that he forgets his real love, Iarine, and transfers his affections to her. At this stage Zelneth is several times referred to as 'the dark maiden', and this

behaviour makes her a worthy sister of 'the dark youth' Karadan.

However, Zelneth is destined for happiness. Feydeelen, the good fairy of the flowers, says 'fondly' - for the benefit of the reader rather than Zelneth, who does not hear - 'Kings shall sue for Zelneth, and Zelneth shall cause the ardent lover to forget his first love' (231). This is deceptive; the reader may be tempted to assume that Feydeleen is referring to Phantasmion, but actually she refers to Penselimer. The alert reader will be aware that this marriage has been anticipated early in the tale when she learnt that Zelneth had had a childhood passion for the much older Penselimer. The latter's rejecting fiancée, Anthemmina, had carelessly dangled his miniature portrait in front of the infant Zelneth's eyes (70). Much later on we are reminded of this when we are told that Penselimer was 'the idol of her childhood' (248). Phantasmion asks Penselimer, when he has been restored to sanity and love, whether Zelneth is 'she who was destined to replace all that thou hadst lost in Anthemmina?' to which the middle-aged lover answers in the affirmative. Zelneth and Penselimer are evidently truly happy and well-matched, as is evidenced by their fond teasing of one another (271-272).

Very few of the older generation of characters live to resolve their triangular love-relationships satisfactorily. Indeed, there is an almost wholesale slaughter of the older generation in *Phantasmion*. The two evil brothers, Glandreth and Magnart, both die in the war against the triple alliance of Palm Land, Altamerra and Nemerosa. Their humble origins have been repeatedly stressed - their father was a shepherd - apparently as an explanation of their ambition and ruthlessness. Magnart meets his death at the hands of Phantasmion. In the general slaughter, Magnart's body cannot be identified, so he receives no regal funeral. Glandreth, the more evil of the two brothers, combusts and is destroyed by fire, like the evil sorceress Malderyl. The latter and her evil sister, Melledine, match the two evil brothers, all of whom perish. Melledine commits suicide as her misty vale is replaced by a beautiful and salubrious environment.

The former queen of Albinian, Anthemmina, dies of starvation on the barren island where Glandreth has imprisoned her. Like Penselimer, she recovers her sanity and recognises her now adult daughter, Iarine, in whose arms she dies. Mother and daughter are permitted a healing weep together before Anthemmina expires. Iarine's father, Albinian, has also died in her presence.

Maudra has despaired at the death of her thoroughly unworthy lover, Glandreth. She blames the enchantress, Seshelma, for his death and attacks the water spirit. Seshelma retaliates by striking Maudra dumb and inflicting a fatal wound. She is allowed the joy of being reunited with her young son, Eurelio, before she dies.

Both Dorimant and Zalia have of course been dead since near the beginning of the fairy tale. Arzene, who had been devoted to her children rather than her husband, Magnart, has died soon after discovering the corpse of her son, Karadan, on the seashore. On this discovery, she swooned, fell

into the water and was drowned, just like her son.

These multiple deaths in the older generation leave most of the younger generation without parents. They are free to choose their own partners, which they do, from genuine affection and devotion, rather than from ambition or dynastic considerations. Additionally, as Dennis Low has accurately commented:

> In the second generation of *Phantasmion* characters, the only relationships which survive are those which are spontaneously created without the means of deception. The fairies may have their influence but, in the final analysis, no amount of magic, no amount of wishing, can bring relationships between two people into being without the consent of both involved. (CB 12, p.38, fn.47)

The first love-triangle among the younger generation is that between the eponymous hero Phantasmion, Iarine, the daughter of Albinian and Anthemmina, and Karadan, son of Magnart and Arzene. Initially, Iarine seems to be wary of both princes, though their passion for her is never in doubt. However, gradually Iarine inclines towards Phantasmion - her cousin Karadan has never been a serious candidate in her eyes. During one of her several separations from Phantasmion, we are told that Iarine:

> was thinking only of Phantasmion. Her love had hitherto been as a distant strain of music, scarce noted by one that is busily occupied; but now the harmony sounds fuller and more distinct; it will be heard, and the hum of many voices falls into an undersong. (166)

Unlike her mother, Anthemmina, whose father insisted that she should marry Albinian, Iarine refuses to bow to paternal pressure and fulfil her dying father's wish that she should marry her cousin Karadan. Nonetheless, Iarine still recognises that she has obligations to other people, which she must fulfil, before she can yield to the pleasures of a companionate marriage with Phantasmion. Iarine tells the young King of Palm Land: 'My heart is thine, and yet I may not go with thee; I am bound by a vow to make a pilgrimage elsewhere' (182). Sara Coleridge describes the first part of Phantasmion's reaction to this speech in terms of the natural imagery she often uses to describe her characters and their reactions to events: 'Phantasmion felt like one who has dreamt of golden fruit, and, waking, sees what he had dreamt of glowing nigh, but finds his arms fettered, his feet fastened to the ground' (183). The latter part of this simile is built around the ideas of war and captivity; this too is highly apt, for he has an obligation to fight a war before he can enjoy a companionate marriage with Iarine.

Iarine's love both matures him and gives him a reason to mature. After returning from his first period of travelling, and, among other things meeting and falling in love with Iarine, Phantasmion has developed a sense of

responsibility. He summons the council of the Land of Palms and informs it what he has learnt on this travels concerning the welfare of his country. His growing maturity is expressed in another natural image. He has changed,

> appearing no more like him who till then had been called the sovereign of Palm Land, than a tree full robed in leaf and blossom resembles the same tree ere a bud is unfolded; for he was clothed with majesty, and spoke like one who desired and deserved to be a King. (120)

The other member of the younger generation who is in love with Iarine, and so part of the triangle, is Karadan. In *Phantasmion*, Karadan is an unusual figure in being very much a morally 'grey' figure among mainly clear cut 'black' and 'white' characters. In this, he is one of the most interesting personages in the fairy tale. Like those members of the older generation who use supernatural means and the enigmatic silver pitcher to determine marriages, Karadan also employs some of these methods to try and persuade Iarine to marry him. Furthermore, he has entered into alliance with the irredeemably evil enchantress, Seshelma, whose presence is also much in evidence in the older generation's relationships. Karadan's alliance makes the reader uneasy, because other older characters, for example the wicked Maudra, are also in league with Seshelma. Maudra is prepared to sacrifice her baby son to Seshelma in order to have her desires fulfilled by the sorceress. Maudra's infant boy, Eurelio, is rescued from this fate by Phantasmion.

Karadan is repeatedly referred to as 'the dark youth': for example, see pages 69, 71, 142, 145, 165 and 166. Unlike the older generation, Karadan lives to rue the day he entered into a secret alliance with Seshelma, despite the fact that she has supplied him with the silver pitcher. Seshelma proposes that Karadan should steal Eurelio and hand him over to her. (Why she wants this infant is never explained). If Karadan does this for her, Seshelma will convince Iarine that Phantasmion was responsible for the abduction. But Karadan is not wholly corrupt and refuses to do this evil deed. He refuses to

> betray the child that Iarine loves to this monster! One sacrifice I have promised; to gain that heavenly maid, I have made a vow which renders me unworthy to possess her. Surely I have never loved aright. (186)

This is Karadan's moment of tragic awareness of his own flawed character and actions. He goes some way to redeeming himself when he undertakes to guide Iarine to her long-lost mother, whom she has long believed to be dead. But, like Glandreth, he has known her whereabouts all along. Finally, he sacrifices himself to make way for the marriage of Iarine and Phantasmion. He is still so complex a character that, despite his apparent act of self-immolation, he yet cannot resist taking the silver pitcher with him to his own watery grave.

Another triangular relationship between the younger generation which, ultimately, will also be resolved into a happy companionate marriage, is that

between Iarine, Phantasmion and Ulander, the Chief of Nemerosa. Ulander is related to the two evil sisters, who, as we have seen, match the two evil brothers in the structure of the tale. The sorceress Malderyl is Ulander's grandmother, and the enchantress Melledine is his great-aunt. However, there has been an intermediate generation between these two women and Ulander: Sylvabad, who was murdered by the invading Glandreth in Tigridia. Evidently the evil in his blood has been sufficiently watered down, or perhaps Sara Coleridge dismissed the idea of wickedness being hereditary. At any rate, he is rewarded by a companionate marriage.

This seems unlikely when we first meet him as he falls successively in love with Iarine, Zelnoth and Leucoia! Sara Coleridge may have intended this as a parody of her eponymous hero, whose own affections at one stage wander promiscuously from Iarine to Zelneth and then Leucoia. However, at this stage Phantasmion is under an enchantment and is no more responsible for his errant affections than the four lovers in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. Equally, if Ulander is intended as a comment on, or a parody of, Phantasmion, it must be admitted that there is something irresistibly comic about Ulander; whereas we take the eponymous hero with the utmost seriousness. The final transference of Ulander's affection from Zelneth to her sister, Leucoia, is humorously treated. Although Ulander is originally downcast by the news of the marriage of Zelneth, whom he thinks he still loves, to Penselimer, he is quickly comforted by Leucoia:

> The lady's gentle countenance tempted Ulander to pour forth all his sorrow to her, and even while he spoke, her looks of pity stole into his heart, and softened the bitterness of that grief which he described so eloquently.... Ulander kept by the side of Leucoia, continuing his discourse as much for the sake of the listener as the subject; for, while he beheld her gentle smiles, and soft retreating eyes, new thoughts and wishes began to rise in his bosom. Insensibly he ceased to think of Zelneth. (276)

Soon, Ulander and Leucoia have reached a mutual understanding to the effect that they make each other happy, and will marry and make their lives together, reigning in Ulander's domain of Nemerosa.

In conclusion, *Phantasmion* has both a structure and a moral purpose to offer its readers, though these may not be readily apparent on a cursory reading. It is perhaps a case of art concealing art. Sara Coleridge's intentions may have been much simpler, but as D.H. Lawrence so wisely commented, 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale'.[5] However, Sara Coleridge's letters suggest that she was aware of a didactic purpose, though in the widest and least obtrusive possible sense. Her brother, Derwent, had raised various objections to *Phantasmion*, including its lack of a clear moral purpose. Sara Coleridge's reply

[5] DH Lawrence *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 19.

to Derwent states her defence:

> Now I fairly admit that the tale in question was written to illustrate no one general truth; I thought it sufficient for the soul and individuality of the piece that there should be upon the whole a unity of conception and feeling throughout […] If you ask me, however, what advantage a young person could possibly derive from such a tissue of unrealities, I should say that every work of fancy in its degree, and according to the merit of its execution, feeds and expands the mind; whenever the poetical beauty of things is vividly displayed, truth is exhibited, and thus the imagination of the youthful reader is stimulated to find truth for itself […] There is no fear of […] [children[[…] mistaking the people or events of fairy tales for realities, but they may and should perceive the truths and realities both of the human mind and of nature which may be conveyed under such fictions [….] Tales of daily life, when the ostensible moral is strongly marked, in my opinion, have generally less of this merit, than fictions where the scene lies out-of-doors, and the materials of which have more to do with the general, than with the petty and particular.[6]

The general moral is about marriage. The majority of the members of the older generation in *Phantasmion* are involved in disastrous triangular love relationships. These have arisen because the hand has been given in marriage unaccompanied by the heart. The marriages had been built on the ambitions of the men and the unwise obedience of the daughters to their parents. Sometimes these marriages are also brought about by enchantment, a compulsory ingredient for any fairy tale. The younger generation is also involved in a number of love-triangles, but with the exception of the complex character, Karadan, these relationships resolve themselves into companionate unions based on mutual love and respect.

[6] Quoted in Earl Leslie Griggs' *Coleridge Fille A Biography of Sara Coleridge* Oxford University Press London New York Toronto 1940, 117