

Napoleon's Historic and Aesthetic Threat: Commanding Genius and Shakespearean Allusion in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Zapolya*

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SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE'S PLAY *ZAPOLYA* premiered at London's Surrey Theatre, formerly the Royal Circus, in February of 1818. After receiving ten performances, it was never performed again.¹ Since then, it has widely been considered something of a disaster. In the preface to the first compilation of Coleridge's theatrical works in 1857, Derwent Coleridge writes, "As an acting drama, it had been pronounced 'beautiful but impractical,' a criticism to which nothing needs to be added."² Modern critics agree, with Julie Carlson calling it "unstageworthy"³ and J.D. Coates adding that it has "very little literary value."⁴ If the critics are united in their dismissal of *Zapolya*, they are also united in seeing it as a conservative reaction against the recent events in France, with Coleridge using the play to express fear and concern over Jacobinism, democracy, and rule of the masses.⁵ For in *Zapolya*, Coleridge stages a conflict between righteous constitutional monarchy and debased false democracy, a struggle that echoes the recent Napoleonic Wars. Written just months after the battle of Waterloo and produced in two parts bearing the subtitles the "Usurper's Fortune" and the "Usurper's Fate," *Zapolya* features a villain referred to as an "Emperor," an obvious allusion to Napoleon. Despite *Zapolya's* contemporary relevance, Coleridge turned to an old play for the story's template. *Zapolya* is based on Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which Coleridge notes in the play's advertisements.⁶ Though Coleridge was a noted Shakespearean critic and lecturer, he had not previously adapted Shakespeare, and despite the recent success of his play *Remorse*,⁷ he was known primarily as a poet and not a playwright. Especially in light of *Zapolya's* ostensible failure, Coleridge's choice of source material raises obvious questions: why write a play based on contemporary events using the outline of a Shakespearean play? Why specifically *The Winter's Tale*?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions. It will first examine why Coleridge adapted Shakespeare, and then it will turn to why he specifically

¹ George Erving, "Coleridge as Playwright," in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 406.

² Derwent Coleridge, "Preface" to *The Dramatic Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Derwent Coleridge (London: Edward Moxon, 1857), p. vi.

³ Julie Carlson, "Command Performances: Burke, Coleridge, and Schiller's Dramatic Reflections on the Revolution in France," *The Wordsworth Circle* 23.2 (Spring 1992): 121, accessed March 20, 2014. www.proquest.com.

⁴ J.D. Coates, "Coleridge's Debt to Harrington: A Discussion of *Zapolya*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38.3 (July-September 1977): 501, accessed March 29, 2014. www.jstor.com.

⁵ Paola Degli Esposti, "The Translucence of Eternity in Time: Shakespeare and Coleridge's *Zapolya*," in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Romanticism*, ed. Joseph Ortiz (Burlington, VT: RecAshgate, 2013), p. 143.

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Zapolya*, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 16: Poetical Works III: Plays, Part 2*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 1338.

⁷ Jim Mays, "Are Coleridge's Plays Worth a Candle?," *The Coleridge Bulletin* 29 (Summer 2007): 2, accessed April 13, 2014. www.friendsofcoleridge.com.

chose *The Winter's Tale*. There is one overall answer: Shakespeare's tragedies and romances, particularly *The Winter's Tale*, provide the ideal form for Coleridge to detail the rise and inevitable fall of a particular type of leader, a villainous ruler that Coleridge calls in his *Biographia Literaria* a "commanding genius."⁸ In *Zapolya*, Coleridge uses Shakespearean conventions and tropes from *The Winter's Tale* to describe attributes of commanding geniuses while simultaneously commenting on their historic and aesthetic threat.

In Coleridge's play, the character Emerick is the Napoleonic villain. Angela Esterhammer suggests that the wicked Emerick is a type of "commanding genius" that Coleridge describes in his literary autobiography.⁹ Written in the same time period as *Zapolya*, the *Biographia Literaria* is a work both personal and philosophical. In it, he expresses feelings of deep wariness about this type of leader,¹⁰ a figure who resembles the recently deposed Napoleon. Coleridge writes that "commanding geniuses" arise in "times of tumult" in "the shaping spirit of Ruin to destroy the wisdom of ages to substitute the fancies of a day, and to change kings and kingdoms, as the wind shifts and shapes the clouds."¹¹ More important, their power arises from their exceptional ability to "impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality."¹² In other words, the commanding genius is a man, most likely a military man, who takes advantage of tumultuous times, manipulates his surroundings, and bends situations and environments to his will.

Many of Shakespeare's villains are types of commanding geniuses—characters who imagine the world in one way and then proceed to make it conform to their expectations. By aligning Emerick with Shakespeare's wicked characters, Coleridge was making an appeal to both history and aesthetics on the significance of the threat of these villainous rulers. Notably, these commanding geniuses—including Coleridge's Emerick—enact their villainy in a similar fashion: with words. Though they almost all commit physical acts of perfidy, their power is predicated on their ability to manipulate people, and this power of manipulation springs from their ability to deliver beautiful, eloquent, and convincing rhetoric.

Shakespeare's plays, of course, are deeply invested in the ethics of rhetoric, including rhetoric's perverse ability to manipulate and persuade.¹³ His works are therefore a fitting inspiration for *Zapolya* and the villainous Emerick. However, Shakespearean rhetoric not only influences the other characters in a play, but it also has the ability to influence the audience, too. For example, Wayne C. Booth argues that Macbeth's rhetorical abilities charm both other

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume vii: Biographia Literaria, Part 1*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), p. 32.

⁹ Angela Esterhammer, "Cognitive Process, Commanding Genius, and Comparative Literature," *The Coleridge Bulletin* 16 (Winter 2000): 57.

¹⁰ Coleridge, *BL*, p. 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹³ Scott F. Crider, *With What Persuasion: An Essay on Shakespeare and the Ethics of Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 3, 6.

characters and the audience. He writes, “We [i.e. the audience] naturally tend to feel with the character who speaks the best poetry of the play, no matter what his deeds . . .”¹⁴ As Booth suggests, Macbeth expresses himself so beautifully that he compels the sympathy of other characters and the audience despite his overt treachery. The persuasive power of rhetoric is so robust that it creates the inability to recognize the villain from the hero, and audiences frequently root for the antagonist. As an example, John Gillies claims that it is these sorts of rhetorical gift that make the villainous Iago consistently outshine the sympathetic Othello in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, even when the villain is “played by the prop boy . . .”¹⁵ In Shakespeare’s plays, commanding geniuses use language and rhetoric to persuade and manipulate other characters and audience members, and this is simultaneously presented as deeply troubling and deeply appealing.

Similarly, Emerick uses expressive and persuasive rhetoric to gain the throne and the audience’s sympathy, an ability that directly echoes Shakespeare’s villains. Indeed, Emerick’s initial rhetoric makes it difficult to discern whether he is the hero or the villain. Consider his first major speech, wherein he introduces himself as the ostensible defender of freedom and justice:

Is it conscience
That a free nation should be handed down,
Like the dull clods beneath our feet, by chance
And the blind law of lineage? That whether infant
Or man matured, a wise man or an idiot,
Hero or natural coward, shall have guidance
Of a free people’s destiny should fall out
In the mere lottery of a reckless nature,
Where few the prizes and the blanks are countless?¹⁶

In this speech, Emerick shows that he “recognizes the ideological importance of appearing to have [popular support].”¹⁷ By appearing to have the consent of the people, he makes it so. Moreover, he rhetorically pivots attention away from his own unscrupulous and undemocratic ascension. He thus linguistically tricks the people, as shown by Casimir’s admiring rejoinder, “What better claim can sovereign wish or need / Than the free voice of men who love their country?”¹⁸ As a commanding genius, Emerick is able to obfuscate his true intentions by leading the other characters astray through his deceitful language.

Emerick’s power is not merely rhetorical, though. As one of the leaders of

¹⁴ Wayne C. Booth, “Macbeth as Tragic Hero,” *The Journal of General Education* 6.1 (October 1951): 17-25, accessed April 16, 2014. www.jstor.com.

¹⁵ John Gillies, “Stanislavski, *Othello*, and the Motives of Eloquence,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), p. 67.

¹⁶ Coleridge, *Zapolya*, Prelude i, 302-311, p. 1352.

¹⁷ Esterhammer, p. 59.

¹⁸ Coleridge, *Zapolya*, Prelude i, 315-316, p. 1352.

King Andreas's army, Emerick's power is also military, another feature that aligns him with Shakespeare's commanding geniuses. In both Coleridge's and Shakespeare's plays, power is not defined as either linguistic or military: one involves the other, and these disparate types of power are engaged in a symbiotic relationship. Emerick's words motivate military action, and the military action then enforces the authority of Emerick's false words, moves that echo those of Shakespeare's commanding geniuses like Richard III and Henry V.

Historical roots then further align Coleridge's and Shakespeare's commanding geniuses. As Emerick is an obvious allusion to Napoleon, Coleridge's villain is not simply one of fiction—he is one of history. Likewise, Shakespeare's commanding geniuses are frequently plucked from the pages of history books, and the threats of the commanding genius are corroborated through their roles in history and/or myth. With these connections to Napoleonic history and Shakespearean quasi-history, Coleridge is implicitly making an argument about the scope of Emerick's danger. Emerick's Napoleonic and dangerous ideas—most notably his false claims of democracy—are not just threats to contemporary European society. Instead, they rank among those threats that have destroyed societies from Roman times to the modern era. Such military power combined with rhetorical genius are more than threats to Coleridge's time. They are threats for *all* time.

Bolstering this claim that Coleridge was using Shakespearean allusions to comment on the historical scope of the threat is his naming of *Zapolya's* kingdom. The land that Emerick usurps is called Illyria. Though this name obviously echoes Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, it also evokes images of the historical Illyria. A land on the Balkan Peninsula that was governed by war-like rulers and subsequently ravaged by warfare during the time of the Roman Empire, Illyria was eventually dissolved following a final, disastrous conflict.¹⁹ The connection to the historical Illyria gains traction with Coleridge's character names, which are taken from early aristocratic Hungarian families.²⁰ These names appeal to a sense of history, and they place the action within the vicinity of the Balkans. Notably, many of Napoleon's conquered lands were renamed "Illyrian Provinces,"²¹ further drawing a line between antiquity, Shakespearean romance, and contemporary conflict. With these references, Coleridge underscores the point that Napoleon's threat and the threat of the commanding genius is one that must be taken seriously because it has threatened societies both ancient and modern.

If Coleridge modeled *Zapolya* on Shakespeare's insights into the rhetorical and historical traits of the commanding genius, he specifically chose *The Winter's Tale* because it has particular elements that further display the deleterious nature of that kind of power. First, *The Winter's Tale* contains

¹⁹ Eckstein, Arthur M. *Rome Enters the Greek East: From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230-170 BC*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2009. 29-76. Print.

²⁰ Mays, J.C.C. "Introduction," in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 16: Poetical Works III: Plays: Part 2*, ed. Mays (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 1334.

²¹ Esposti, p. 156.

overt supernatural occurrences, which Coleridge echoes in *Zapolya* and uses to detail the nature of the villainous ruler. Also, *The Winter's Tale* is marked by a large time gap between the third and the fourth acts, which Coleridge employs in *Zapolya* to show the disastrous long-term effects of Emerick's reign. In short, *The Winter's Tale* provides both the thematic and the formal material to further display the adverse effects of *Zapolya's* rule.

In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explicitly links the idea of commanding genius to superstition. He writes, "A debility and dimness of the imaginative power, and a consequent necessity of reliance on the immediate impressions of the senses do, as we well know, render the mind liable to superstition and fanaticism."²² Then Coleridge states that these men—and they are all men—who employ reason first, and then swerve towards superstition and fanaticism, are able to "impress their preconceptions" on an unsuspecting world.²³

The juxtaposition of reason and superstition and fanaticism is not as incongruous as it first seems. According to Tobin Siebers, the conflation was a common one in Romantic thought because analytical reason left man bereft of religious faith while offering nothing satisfactory to replace it. He writes, "The wisdom of Reason was the wisdom of the serpent: it condemned the prejudices of superstition only to plummet into similar prejudices. It scorned expulsion only to expel faith and belief."²⁴ *Zapolya's* examination of superstition, fanaticism, and rationality intrinsically connects it with *The Winter's Tale*.

Indeed, the initiating incident of *The Winter's Tale* embodies Romantic concerns about these disparate systems of belief. Like Emerick, Leontes is a commanding genius who brings his own preconceptions into reality when he jealously and irrationally accuses his wife Hermione of infidelity (which Coleridge transforms into Emerick's false accusation of *Zapolya*). Regarding this moment, Northrop Frye writes, "The world of Leontes' jealousy does not exist at all: only the consequences of believing in it exist."²⁵ In this, Leontes epitomizes Coleridge's definition of a commanding genius since he creates his own reality. As expected, Leontes' jealousy is paranoid and delusional, and he attacks Hermione with fanatic vehemence. However, there are insinuations beforehand that Leontes was a reasonable, rational man, and that he was a good husband. Nevertheless, his temper turns in an instant. The change is so sudden that Hermione incredulously remarks, "The crown and comfort of my life, your favour, / I do give lost; for I do feel it gone, / But know not how it went."²⁶ Leontes' rationality thus exists on a fulcrum that can swiftly turn from the rational into paranoia and fanaticism. Since Coleridge wrote *Zapolya*

²² Coleridge, *BL*, p. 30.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 32.

²⁴ Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984), pp. 25-26.

²⁵ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), p. 115.

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, The Edition of the Shakespeare Head Press Oxford (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994), III.ii.94-96.

following the French Revolution—which similarly existed on a fulcrum that shifted from Enlightenment rationality to frenzied fanaticism—it is easy to understand why Coleridge was inspired by *The Winter's Tale's* exploration of the connection between rationality and fanaticism.

It is a play populated by elements of the fantastic: oracles proclaim guilt and innocence, animals perform an almost supernatural bidding (see Shakespeare's most famous stage direction of all time, "Exit, pursued by a bear"²⁷), and statues come to life. Likewise, *Zapolya* is filled with elements of the fantastic, the uncanny, and the supernatural. Coleridge's play draws upon these Gothic and supernatural features of *The Winter's Tale* to make an explicit relationship between reason, superstition, and fanaticism.

Emerick creates opportune connections between these three and uses them to justify his rule. When King Andreas's death is accompanied by the appearance of wolves or a storm attends Emerick's triumph, for example, they are taken as supernatural signs of Emerick's ascendancy. As Casimir, Emerick's most loyal soldier, says to his doubting father on one of these supposedly supernatural portents, "Whence sprang the name of Emperor? Was it not / By nature's fiat?"²⁸ Explained as omens, these natural events are taken by the citizenry as such. Emerick, though, goes a step further; not only does he voice these superstitious justifications, he also *believes* in them. The corrupt and perverse Emerick turns to astrology to foretell his future. This act, which is one of many that is "explicitly portrayed as Satanic,"²⁹ shows him the fading power of his brother Andreas's reign and his own conquest when he sees that "the changeful planet" shall "sink the enemies of Emerick."³⁰ These Gothic and supernatural validations of Emerick's coup coexist alongside his rationalist and supposedly democratic defense of his usurpation. In Emerick, Coleridge demonstrates the Romantic belief that superstition and fanaticism accompany rationality. Emerick's usurpation is not just one of mysterious signs and astrological rites; instead, it is allegedly contemporary democracy.

If Emerick's rule is marked by rationality juxtaposed with superstition, Coleridge offers a clear alternative in Christianity. Indeed, *Zapolya* is a play whose explicit religious and moral messages permeate the text. One of *Zapolya's* main messages is that true religious belief saves man from rationality and superstition. In contrast, Coleridge felt that "atheism left man bereft of human spirit and identity."³¹ Notably, Coleridge felt it was the "Encyclopedists of the French Enlightenment" that denigrated and reduced Christian belief and replaced it with atheism,³² which is a belief system that played a strong hand in shaping the nature of the French Revolution.

In *Zapolya*, it is the Christians, namely Zapolya, Raab Kiuprili, and Bethlen,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, III.iii.57.

²⁸ Coleridge, *Zapolya*, Prelude i, 320-321, p. 1352.

²⁹ Esposti, p. 146.

³⁰ Coleridge, *Zapolya*, Prelude i, 427-429, p. 1358.

³¹ Frederick Burwick, *Playing to the Crowd: London Popular Theatre, 1780-1830* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 55.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

who triumph in the end. In contrast, Emerick has no such faith, and “the chief villain remains an atheist.”³³ Despite his superstitious conjuring and his analytical rationality, Emerick is the type of commanding genius that Coleridge feared—one bereft of faith, identity, and moral boundaries. Coleridge explains in his *Biographia Literaria* that religion is “both the cornerstone and the key-stone of morality,”³⁴ and Emerick’s turn away from religion can thus be seen as a turn towards immoral treachery, disorder, and lawlessness. Consequently, *Zapolya* describes what happens when these dark forces overrun a society.

However, Coleridge does not allow his play to end tragically. Like Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, a large time gap breaks the first and the second parts of Coleridge’s story. With its temporal break, *The Winter’s Tale* explores “what time does to man,”³⁵ a statement that is also true for *Zapolya*. In both, the contrivance of the time gap allows latent themes to come to fruition and the passing of time to reveal the true nature of man. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the sixteen-year gap produces the cooling of Leontes’ temper and feelings of deep remorse; in *Zapolya*, the twenty-year gap shows the consequences of a commanding genius’s rule, and it allows Emerick’s evil to reach its apex. Moreover, it allows Bethlen, Zapolya’s son and the rightful king of Illyria, to mature into Emerick’s challenger. Again, the frame of *The Winter’s Tale* provides both the thematic material and the formal structure for *Zapolya*.

Zapolya’s twenty-year gap comes between Part I (the “Usurper’s Fortune”) and Part II (the “Usurper’s Fate”), and the intervening years are disastrous for Illyria. A civil war “shook and engulphed the pillars of Illyria;”³⁶ mothers and their infant children were slaughtered by Emerick’s men in an attempt to kill Zapolya and the baby Andreas; military men now prowl the countryside harassing women; and a war-wolf is rumored to haunt the countryside. In short, the kingdom is full of terrors both corporeal and supernatural.

The time gap not only shows the effect of his rule on the kingdom, but it also reveals the extent of Emerick’s wickedness. Besides allowing his men to run rampant through the land and ordering them to kill innocent children (in a move that is undoubtedly meant to recall King Herod’s slaughtering of the Innocents), he now plots to betray even his closest allies and friends. Truly, the twenty-year gap serves to rob Emerick of any last moral compunction. Throughout part one, Emerick’s most loyal soldier and ardent defender was Casimir, the son of Raab Kiuprili. By part two, though, Casimir has taken to hiding his beautiful wife, Lady Sarolta, in a faraway estate because he fears Emerick’s intentions. He has good reason to do so, for Emerick plots to seduce (or rape, if she does not accede) Lady Sarolta and kill Casimir. Luckily for Casimir, though, he discovers Emerick’s treachery and kills the wicked Emperor. Regardless, the time gap fulfills its duty by allowing time to reveal

³³ Erving, p. 410.

³⁴ Coleridge, *BL*, p. 203.

³⁵ Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Triumph of Time in *The Winter’s Tale*,” in *The Winter’s Tale Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Hunt (New York: Garland, 1995), p. 140.

³⁶ Coleridge, *Zapolya*, I.i, 301, p. 1375.

moral character. In the case of *Zapolya's* Emerick, this means exposing his corrupt and debased nature and the devastating effects of his rule.

It is not coincidental that this time gap roughly approximates the timespan of England's involvement in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Since both *The Winter's Tale* and *Zapolya* use the time gap to explore how time reveals character, Coleridge is simultaneously apologizing for and indicting the positive early Romantic view of the Revolution and its incipient "democracy." Unfortunately, they—and their French Revolutionary democratic ideals—were wrong, as time had come to prove. Likewise, *Zapolya's* time gap proves the perfidy of the Napoleonic Emerick and the failure of his "democratic" reign.

However, like *The Winter's Tale*, *Zapolya* uses the intervening years for a honourable purpose as well. It proves the Christian valor of Zapolya and Raab Kiuprili, who emerge from twenty years of hiding in the war-wolf's cave with their humanity and faith fully intact, and it allows time for Bethlen to develop into a king. Julie Carlson believes that this is one of the most important points of Coleridge's play, writing that "*Zapolya's* general message [is] that it takes time to make a king."³⁷ Indeed, the time gap gives Bethlen the formal device by which he has the opportunity to mature and prove his worthiness. For in *Zapolya*, even though it openly supports hereditary monarchical politics, which is not unusual of course for an Englishman like Coleridge, the rulers still must prove their merit, and the intervening twenty years demonstrate the unwavering Christian faith and moral goodness of the rightful rulers al (i.e. Bethlen, Zapolya, and Raab Kiuprili). Thus, despite *Zapolya's* staunch support of the monarchy, Coleridge qualifies his position by making the rulers prove their worth. According to Julie Carlson, what Coleridge in fact supports in *Zapolya* is a "limited hereditary monarchy" rather than an absolute monarchy.³⁸ Notably, it is the contrivance of the time gap that allows him to make this nuanced distinction.

It is for all of these reasons—to demonstrate the malign traits of commanding genius, to show the disastrous nature of Emerick's reign, and to further allegorize Napoleonic rule—that Coleridge turned to *The Winter's Tale* while writing *Zapolya*. The threat of the commanding genius may be a substantial one in history, but at least in literature, time can heal all wounds. In *Zapolya*, Coleridge used *The Winter's Tale* to display that virtue and right will eventually triumph.

³⁷ Carlson, p. 120.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.