

Missing Marilyn

Anya Taylor

I AM GRATEFUL FOR MY 48 YEAR ASSOCIATION with the indomitable Marilyn Gaull, the sharpest of editors, the most alert—if unsparing—of critics, and sometimes the most enthusiastic of supporters. In 1972 she published my first article, “Magic in Coleridge’s Poetry.” In 1976, we worked together on a special issue (Spring, 1977) of *The Wordsworth Circle* on “Romanticism and the Occult” that grew out of a conference I gave at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a conference featuring remarkable scholars from across the United States and England (Irving Buchen, Martha Banta, John Beer, Charles Patterson, Howard Brogan, Aileen Ward, Leonard Trawick, Jane McClelan, George Mills Harper, and Coleman Parsons). Eleven years later Marilyn encouraged the gathering and publication of a second special issue of *The Wordsworth Circle* (Spring, 1988), “Romanticism and Criminal Justice,” which grew out of another John Jay Conference I ran, this time featuring a different set of greats: Laurence Lockridge, Judith Plotz, Paul Magnuson, William Heffernan, Donald Reiman, and David Erdman. Marilyn was most generous in her help and enthusiasm. Her editing savvy was sharpest as she whipped into shape two books I published with Palgrave—*Bacchus in Romantic England* and *Erotic Coleridge*. It is certainly true that I was often in the dog-house with Marilyn. But even when she was very publicly giving me the frosty treatment, she was teaching me. Several letters from her strike me as particularly astute, and monitory for all of us struggling to write well. I want to share her wisdom with my fellow Coleridgeans.

The first is a hilarious attack on my excessively fulsome acknowledgement page. She addresses not only strategy but also character flaws:

I am protecting you from the parodies that have humiliated other authors... We are thinking about one brief paragraph at the end of the preface... Those of us who are lucky enough to know you agree: you are a lovely woman, gracious and generous, but these acknowledgements are not about you. They set up your book. And in the form you gave me you come across as so many do, as someone who is slightly incompetent, emotionally unsteady, needing an exceptional amount of help, either hiding behind or showing off her many friends, her great family, all the fun she has in life, her ineptitude at the computer. YOU are in fact a formidable scholar having written an insightful and we hope authoritative book and your acknowledgements do not contribute to that persona. YOUR debts belong in the footnotes... And, again, as I said before, the usual response: ‘given how much help she had, why isn’t it better?’ ... Remember, it is a scholarly book, about Coleridge, not a memoir—so let’s keep the focus on him and on your status as a scholar, the expert, the one who is emotionally as well as intellectually capable of writing it.

Stinging indeed, and demanding not only a return to my red pen, but a refresher with my therapist.

The second letter is a vignette from her suggestions while editing my book *Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law against Divorce*. Inspired by my chapter on the steamy collaborations of Coleridge with Sara Hutchinson as they sat close to each other, Marilyn wrote:

I don't know if you approach this in your book, but Wordsworth similarly was considered either a-sexual or someone who had repressed or displaced his sexuality on nature until someone published the love letters (ed. Beth Darlington) which should have altered everything—they are so explicit and the family had kept them hidden even after his affair with Annette Vallon had been made public. But, still, scholars don't deal with them, especially Freudians: the truth is less interesting than these hopelessly stupid theories. So contrary to tradition, they were two sexy guys—maybe it's the scholars who are repressed. In any case, can you allude somewhere to the Wordsworth letters, called My Dearest Love? M.

“Two sexy guys!” Marilyn shows again her quick fervor. Wordsworth's “rapture” and “pleasure” with his wife come in to my book on pp. 41-2, inspired by Marilyn.

The third letter (2/11/2005) is a reminder that as professional, multifarious, and energetic as she was in all aspects of our field, she also had a joyful personal life, where her zest took a different form.

You always imagine my being somewhere wonderful and having a good time. I am touched since my colleagues think I am pathetic. I work here in my office seven days, nearly every day of the year. My travels are all for lectures and business and then I carry heaps of other people's mss. I am teaching like you, with papers, committees, reports. But I go ice-skating with my sweetheart in Central Park on Sunday Nights, then out for lovely dinners—think of me that way. And, best, I like it all, delighted that life is so sweet. Having good work to do for other people is more rewarding than I could have imagined. So, we have another book to look forward to, you and me, and you and Mark, and your whole amazing tribe are, I hope, flourishing. Love, M

As I finished writing this recollection (winnowed from many often humorous incidents and dramas), I went back and removed twenty adjectives, so deeply has her influence penetrated. As the grande dame advises, be confident of your own work, and make room for life.