

Sara Coleridge and Phantasmion

Shirley Watters

(*The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series No 10, Autumn 1997, pp22-38)

In a letter to her brother Derwent in 1824, when she was 21, Sara Coleridge declared, "You have been very good indeed lately in the writing way... The affection you express for me gives me sincere delight. I have often thought of Mr Lamb & his sister & wished our fate would be like theirs: but I will not trust myself with you till you are past the marrying age: a brother's wife I never can consent to live with."

Her fondness for her brother and her respect for Charles and Mary Lamb drew her towards idealising, and perhaps finding refuge in the brother/sister relationship. She had recently become engaged to her cousin, Henry Nelson Coleridge, and she was struggling to reconcile her intellectual aspirations with the expected demands of a Victorian marriage. Seven months later she wrote again to Derwent: "I should have been happier with my taste, temper and habits, had I been of your sex instead of the helpless dependent being I am. The thing that would suit me best of anything would be the life of a country clergyman.... I should not marry."

Her reflections echo a remark made by Lamb at about this time that "He (STC) ought not to have had a wife or children; he should have a sort of diocesan care of the world, - no parish duty." According to the tenets of the time, of course, Coleridge need not have got himself into the family way, but for Sara, with her beauty and accomplishments, it was the natural course to follow.

The marriage relationship, however, seemed deeply successful. Henry Nelson Coleridge, son of Colonel James Coleridge of Ottery St. Mary, was 4 years older than Sara, an intellectual and cultivated young man. When Derwent went up to St John's College in 1820, Henry, who was distinguishing himself at King's, introduced him to

[23]

Cambridge Society, including his fellow Etonians, and thus began a lifelong friendship. After a brilliant University career, Henry began practising as a Chancery barrister, and on January 5th 1823 he and his older brother, James Taylor, called at Moreton House in Highgate to pay their respects to their uncle, STC, and to meet their aunt and cousin who had travelled down from Keswick. It was the first time for ten years that Mr and Mrs Coleridge and Sara had been together, and it is tantalising that few details of this meeting exist. Perhaps it was too momentous even for these three prolific letter writers. In his 1989 revaluation of Sara Coleridge, "A Victorian Daughter", Bradford Keyes Mudge comments: "For Coleridge to find his only daughter...now grown into an attractive, intelligent, industrious, and unassuming young woman, possessing the very qualities he had tried unsuccessfully to instil in his sons, would have been to confront a powerfully disturbing irony."

For Henry the meeting was disturbing in a different way - he fell in love - and within two months he and Sara had become engaged. They agreed on secrecy until Henry's career was firmly established, though Sara found the necessary minor

deceptions a strain for her strong moral sense. The following year Henry spent several months at his Ottery home because of ill-health and spoke to his father about his proposed marriage. His fears were realised: the Colonel considered a union into STC's feckless family imprudent, and the older brother, John Taylor, was given the task of informing Sara. She wrote a brave, spirited reply to her uncle: "I may be disengaged, but my own feelings will never permit me to think myself so...When I gave my heart to him I gave it for good and all, and never will take it back..."

Consent was eventually granted, they married after an engagement of 6 years, and remained devoted until Henry's death from spinal paralysis in 1843. (14 years). At that time Sara wrote to Mrs Gillman: "It was at Highgate, at your house, that I first saw my

[24]

beloved Henry. Since then, now 20 years ago, no two beings could be more intimately united in heart and thoughts than we have been... He concerned himself in all my feminine domestic occupations, and admitted me into close intercourse with him in all his higher spiritual & intellectual life." The division of labour is clearly marked. But it was the "spiritual and intellectual life" that nurtured her; "the feminine domestic occupations" involving constant child-bearing that exhausted her. She was often ill, suffering from what she described as "derangement of the nervous system". Midway through their lives together, at a time of particular strain, she spent 3 years, among other literary tasks, writing and revising 'Phantasmion', described by the *Quarterly Review* on publication "as poetry from beginning to end ... a Fairy Tale ... pure as crystal in diction, tinted like an opal with the hues of an ever-springing sunlit fancy". In his Preface to the Woodstock Facsimile edition, Jonathan Wordsworth considers the prettiness of this description belittles the strength of Sara's vision. Kathleen Jones calls the book an "escapist fantasy".

Before we look at some of the text, I'd like to consider briefly how she combined writing with marriage, and her father/brother/husband relationships. Sara Coleridge was a fluent writer of letters. The 1,400 that have survived, together with her manuscript essays and diaries, are all in the Humanities Research Center in the University of Texas. I have had to rely on the published diaries, notebooks and letters of her family and friends, as well as the biography by Professor Mudge, Raymonde Hainton's book on Derwent published last year, and Kathleen Jones' new study, *A Passionate Sisterhood*. Sara herself gives us a glimpse into her early years in the autobiography she started to write a few months before she died of breast cancer at the age of 51, edited and published by her daughter in 1873.

[25]

"My dearest Edith, I have long wished to give you a little sketch of my life. I once intended to have given it with much particularity, but now *time presses*. Many memories are sweet, but the frequently absent father casts a shadow. "Alas! ...I inherited that uneasy health of his, which kept us apart. But I did not mean to start

with alas!" The 26 pages end with a series of dots, which Virginia Woolf found painfully significant, pointing to a life, unfinished like Christabel, sacrificed to editing a father's literary remains. Now, that seems an over-simple early-feminist view.

Dorothy Wordsworth records Sara's birth in her Grasmere Journal: December 24 1802. "Coleridge came this morning with Wedgwood. (They had been travelling in Cornwall) He looked well. We had to tell him of the birth of his little girl, born yesterday at 6 o'clock." Two weeks later - a briefly desperate entry: "Letter from Keswick. C poorly, in bad spirits." No mention of mother or babe. "The Fortitude with which he had had to bear the Impossibility of a GIRL was too much for him." The long separation began. During the next 10 years Sara saw him for only short visits, mostly at Allan Bank, and then not at all for the following 10 years.

Dorothy describes one of these visits in a letter: November 18 1809. "Sara is to stay with us till next Monday. Coleridge does not much insist upon the child's being left at this time of year, but she is to come in the spring, and Mrs C is desirous to put off the evil day, for she dreads the contamination which her lady-like manners must receive from our rustic brood, worse than she would dread illness, I may almost say *death*. As to poor little Sara, she has behaved very sweetly ever since her Mother left her, but there is nothing about her of the natural wildness of a child. She looks ill and has a bad appetite...".

In her Memoir Sara recalls this month-long spring visit by herself when she was six, being her "father's wish". "I slept with him,

[26]

and he would tell me fairy stories when he came to bed at 12 or 1 o'clock." But STC longed for a more demonstrative show of love than this "sweet-tempered, meek, blue-eyed Fairy" could give. She writes, "I remember his showing displeasure to me, and accusing me of want of affection. I could not understand why ... I slunk away, and hid myself in the wood behind the house, and there my friend John ... came to seek me." I am reminded of young STC's flight to the River Otter, but how different was the cause of guilt.

However, to set the balance right, here is another memory: "During my Grasmere visit I used to feel frightened at night on account of the darkness ... My father understood. He insisted that a lighted candle should be left in my room."

Two years later Dorothy gives a more cheerful description of a visit to Greta Hall: "I must say that Sara is a sweet girl - very clever - her theatrical or conceited manners have left her. Her mother is an excellent teacher by Books, for Sara is an admirable scholar for her age. She is also very fond of reading for her amusement - devouring her Book - yet she is childlike and playful with children."

Greta Hall was becoming "a regular school" according to the delighted Mrs Coleridge, with "English, Latin, writing, figures, French and Italian". By the time Sara was 14 Southey could report that "(She) has received an education here at home which would astonish you" (John Estlin); and more practically, Dorothy wrote,

"should it be necessary she will be well fitted to become a Governess in a nobleman's or gentleman's family".

Sara put her education to use first when she was 16. At Southey's suggestion, Derwent began translating from the Latin Martin Dobrizhoffer's book on Paraguay to help pay his way through Cambridge, and Sara eagerly joined him. J H Frere then offered financial assistance, and Derwent gratefully stopped his share of the task, but Sara wanted to continue. Southey agreed, "but she must not

[27]

work too hard" or be "disappointed if nothing was gained by it". The book was published anonymously in 1822 and she earned £113, part of which she gave to Derwent. Their collaboration had given them both pleasure, and they read a number of Italian and Latin books together before Derwent left for Cambridge. The intellectual bond between brother and sister was firmly established and did not weaken after their marriages. Continuing the friendship begun at Cambridge, her brother and husband maintained a close correspondence all their lives, Henry sometimes visiting Helston as a barrister on the Western Circuit. Sara and Derwent's wife, Mary Pridham, wrote to each other frequently - there are 312 ms letters from Sara to Mary in the Texas archive. The STC Editorial Co-operative brought them working together after 1834; and after the deaths of Henry and Sara, their daughter Edith went to live with Derwent and Mary, sharing parish duties with their own daughter Christabel.

I have skimmed over the years here to show how sustaining this sibling link must have been, especially for Sara, who thrived on intellectual discourse. A comment in a letter to Mary illustrates her enjoyment. She is writing about her correspondence with F D Maurice, which often ran to 20 pages. "He is always instructive - but he won't let one enjoy one's own opinions *much* - he either snatches them out of one's hands or tosses them over the hedge on to a dung-hill, or crumples them or takes the shine out of them so that one's ashamed to ask for them back."

Both Derwent and Henry complained of her abstruse communications, the first wanting "more news and less theology", and the second pleading for information about "wife and children", instead of "discourses on taste and criticism". But Sara wasn't interested in anecdote. Writing a holiday letter from Margate, she mentions the price of meat "lamb 8d and beef 9d!" And adds, "I am so often

[28]

twitted with my devotion to intellectual things, that I am always glad of an opportunity of sporting a little beef and mutton erudition."

Before ending this digression on Derwent, it should be said that Sara always had great affection too for Hartley, and their natures perhaps had more in common, though his unsettled existence in the Lake District made communication difficult. When he died suddenly in 1849 she wrote sadly of their long separation,

how he had been "a source of pride and pleasure" in her girlhood, but also the cause of "keen anguish and searching anxiety".

And now to return to Sara's first publication, which was quietly acclaimed by a small circle of readers. STC wrote later, "My dear daughter's translation ... is unsurpassed for pure mother English by anything I have read for a long time." She next turned to a 16th Century French text, 'The Memoirs of Chevalier Bayard'. In September 1824 Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in a letter: "Sara Coleridge rode over to us in Borrowdale ... She is extremely thin; I could not but think of a lily-flower to be snapped by the first blast, when I looked at her delicate form, her fair and pallid cheeks. She is busy with proof-sheets, - a labour that she likes." And here is Mrs Coleridge in a letter to Poole: "Many of the Chevaliers exploits were acted in Italy so that she has immense folios of Italian Histories to look into, all of which is an amusement and a thing for which she seems to have a passion."

"Amusement" - an ominous word. By now she was openly engaged to Henry, and Southey thought it proper that her next project, the translation of the Memoirs of Jean de Troye, should be for "amusement" only, without the pressures of proofs and printers. Her health, always in delicate balance, suffered, and she wrote in a letter (Mary Calvert) "I am unable to sleep at all without laudanum, which I regret much, though I do not think I shall find any difficulty in leaving it off. She started writing essays, parts of which were incorporated

[29]

into her letters; but, writing to Henry in 1827 (5 years into the engagement, 2 years before the marriage) her words belittle her literary ambitions: "My childish and girlish castles in the air are now exchanged for others which have you for their object - to contribute to your daily comfort and pleasure." They were married in Keswick in September 1829. Dorothy Wordsworth records: "On Thursday to dinner arrived the bridal pair - very interesting - and the most pleasing company I ever had to do with at a time so engrossingly interesting to themselves. Sara always was interesting; but she is now much more so - she is so quietly *happy* and cheerful - and not abstracted as she often used to be."

They rented a cottage in Hampstead. The following year Sara became pregnant ("No cause for joy" wrote Dorothy) and Mrs Coleridge came to live with them permanently, an arrangement which pleased them both, enabling Sara to abrogate many of the domestic responsibilities. During the next 10 years she was often pregnant, but only the first two babies survived, Herbert and Edith. She wrote hundreds of little poems for them, and Henry encouraged her to publish a selection called "Pretty Lessons in Verse". They ranged from simple mnemonics -

Lupus means a wolf,
Ursa is a bear
Vulpes means a fox,
Lepus means a hare

to the longer six-versed 'Poppies', of which Derwent, understandably enough, disapproved –

When poor mama long restless lies
She drinks the poppies juice;
That liquor soon can close her eyes
And slumber soft produce.

[30]

She took delight in their education, and continued to study the Classics with Herbert while he was at Eton. She was amused by the surprise of her uncle, Lord Justice Coleridge, that she was reading Aristophanes with Herby. "I had clean forgotten the uncleanness, till my boy discreetly observed that there was a word in the next line which would not do to be voiced aloud." Like her father she did not approve of moral tales, "stories of naughty and good boys and girls, and how their parents, pastors and masters did or ought to have managed them." But, "fairy stories," she wrote, "were wholesome food, by way of variety, for the childish mind. It is curious that on this point Sir Walter Scott, and Charles Lamb, my father, my Uncle Southey and Mr Wordsworth were all agreed."

All this led directly to the writing of Phantasmion, which, according to Edith, "was at first intended (though it soon outgrew its original limits) as a mere child's story for the amusement of her little boy." Sending a copy to her friend, Arabella Brooke, she wrote, "in these days to print a fairy tale is the very way to be *not read* but shoved aside with contempt." Indeed, reviews were mixed, from her brothers included. Hartley admired it; Derwent thought it lacked unity and moral.

She decided against writing any more children's stories or "airy dreams", nor did she wish to join the ranks of lady novelists, though she read widely and formed strong opinions on women writers generally: "... the imaginative vigour of Mrs J Baillie, the eloquence and profundity of Madame de Stael, the brilliancy of Mrs Hemans (though I think *her* over-rated), the pleasant broad comedy of Miss Burney and Miss Ferrier, the melancholy tenderness of Miss Bowles, the pathos of Inchbald and Opie, the masterly sketching of Miss Edgeworth (who, like Hogarth, paints manners as they grow out of morals, and not merely as they are modified and tinctured by

[31]

fashion), the strong and touching, but sometimes coarse pictures of Miss Martineau ... and last not least, the delicate mirth, the gentle-hinted satire, the feminine decorous humour of Jane Austen, who, if not the greatest, is surely the most faultless of female novelists."

But she also commented, "To read novels is all very well; but to write them, except the first rate ones, how distasteful a task it seems to me! to dwell so long...on what is essentially base and worthless!" She might have enjoyed reading George Eliot's

anonymous article in the Westminster Review of October 1856 had she lived another 4 years - "Silly novels of Lady Novelists are a genus of many species...- the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic."

For both women the father's death opened up an escape route, but in different directions. Eliot's daring relationship with Lewes helped her to achieve a fusion of intellect and passion in the novel form, exploring the physical and social laws of life; Sara Coleridge, on the other hand, began to find out that Uncle Southey's strictures were correct - the Angel in the House couldn't also be a career woman. In publishing her mother's Memoir and Letters, Edith Coleridge left out what might offend or displease. The following extract is not included, and I quote from Mudge. Sara wrote, "I reject all those burning expressions which suggest themselves in my mind in crowds and will endeavour to write only at the dictation of that highest mind which has nothing in common with the body. O who will deliver me from this body of death."

This was written in October 1836 during a visit to Ottery St Mary soon after the death of Henry's father, and two years after the deaths of their 4-day old twins, Florence and Berkeley. Fearful that she was pregnant again, she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. On the way home to London, they stopped at an inn at Ilchester and she refused to go further, leaving Mrs Coleridge, Henry, the nurse and the two children to return without her. She insisted on

[32]

staying for 6 weeks, recovering in the peace of her isolation, writing letters, revising Phantasmion, and working on a new edition of her father's 'Aids to Reflection'.

When Coleridge had died in 1834, Sara's grief was mixed with anger at the way he was being "misrepresented", particularly in De Quincey's essays in Tait's Edinburgh Magazine. She partly blamed "the depraved craving of the public for personality". She had written to Henry, "STC's works must be re-issued, (but not) disjointed and unaccompanied. Let them be set forth..." The expression sounds like an act of creation. Together they edited 'Table Talk' (though it was attributed only to Henry), and she began transcribing her father's notes which were to become the four volumes of the Literary Remains. Encouraged by Henry she began to re-read everything Coleridge had written, producing an edition of Aids to Reflection in 1843, Biographia Literaria in 1847 and Essays on his own Times in 1850, and struggled to complete a new edition of the Poems with Derwent before she died in 1852. She had turned from fiction and fantasy to religious philosophy. She wrote to Henry soon after Phantasmion was published, "I feel the strongest bent for theological topics.....(and) I feel the most complete sympathy with my father in his account of his literary difficulties. Whatever subject I commence I feel discontent unless I could pursue it in every direction to the furthest bounds of thought ... This was the reason my father wrote by snatches. He could not bear to complete incompletely, which everybody else does."

In an unusual way, Sara's marriage brought father and daughter into a closer bond, not so much physically as illness on both sides prevented frequent visiting

across Hampstead Heath, but more by congruency of mind. Henry and Sara had first met at the Gillmans' house where Coleridge was lodged, and Sara wrote in a letter to Mrs Gillman at the time of her father's death in that same house 12 years

[33]

later, "It has been one of many blessings attendant on my marriage, that by it we were both drawn into closer communion with that gifted spirit." And that close communion persisted as they continued their editorial work until Henry's final illness and death in 1843. She was shattered by this loss. "Nobody was now left who loved me more than all the world beside, took an interest in whatever concerned me, and saw my whole mind and person through glorifying golden mist. I seemed to be laid bare - reduced from poetry to prose."

But, having arranged for the coffins of her husband and father to be laid together in Highgate Cemetery, she soon eagerly returned to the prose task of putting the STC "literary house" in order. Within 6 months the 5th Edition of "Aids to Reflection" was published, the second volume containing her lengthy essay 'On Rationalism', which became well-known to members of the Oxford Movement. Hartley was impressed: "Dear Sara's treatise ... is a wonder. I say not a wonder of a woman's work - where lives the man that could have written it? None in Great Britain since our Father died." When Kathleen Coburn gave a paper in 1971 on editing the Notebooks, she commented: "Sara Coleridge was probably the most learned of her father's editors; and she is one who cannot, so far as I know, be charged with tampering with any text."

But she does not fit easily into modern critical thinking. She wrote within the prescribed limits of Victorian society, identifying herself with her father, writing under his name, subordinating herself in doing so, but also exerting control over his image. At the first Coleridge Summer Conference in 1986 Professor Mudge discussed the ambiguity of her success in this search for a voice in 19th Century literature. This paper was printed in the second Bulletin, First Series. But as far as I know, there has been no full critical study of Phantasmion.

[34]

I'd like now to consider briefly some possible influences on the writing of the book. Certainly her early life in the Lake District forms the basic fabric. "We all know," she wrote, "that the circumstances of our childhood give the prevailing hue to our involuntary taste and feelings for the rest of our lives. I cannot picture to myself a Paradise without Lakes and Mountains." Her father's youthful comment on the young Dorothy - her "eye watchful in minutest observation of nature" - might be applied to Sara, as her daughter, Edith, described how she "could turn at any time from the most abstruse metaphysical speculations, to inspect the domestic architecture of a spider, or describe the corolla of a rose."

Her wide reading must also have contributed. She too was a "library cormorant", having had free access to Southey's large collection of books. From her

translations she must have absorbed details of past cultures, particularly from the battles and other exploits of Chevalier Bayard. Shaping these experiences was her delight in fairy stories; she had heard them from Uncle Southey at Greta Hall and was now sharing this pleasure with Herbert. Children still enjoy them because the focus is on situation rather than character. Iona and Peter Opie describe them as "Space fiction of the past." In 1845 she added an Envoy to her own copy:

Go, little book, and sing of love and beauty,
To tempt the worldling into fairy land;
Tell him that airy dreams are sacred duty,
Bring better wealth than aught his toils command."

The imagination plays a sacred role in lifting the spirit above the merely mundane. Sara said her book belonged to the same class of fiction as Peter Wilkins and Robinson Crusoe, two of her father's favourite childhood books; she was possibly reading some of his remarks on Defoe at about the time she was writing, and his words

[35]

make an apt introduction: "Novels are to love as fairy tales are to dreams. This is delightfully exemplified in the Arabian Night's Entertainments, and indeed, more or less, in other works of the same kind. In all these there is the same activity of mind as in dreaming.....To this must be added that these tales cause no deep feeling of a moral kind - whether of religion or love." In discussing 'The Ancient Mariner', Deidre Toomey suggests that the Arabian Nights were part of Coleridge's consciousness rather than another mere source for or analogue of his poem. And they provided the idea for Southey's long poem 'Thalaba', published in 1801.

Both these poets kept accounts of their dreams and used them in their writing. For Coleridge, opium inevitably had its effect in prolonging the dream state, and even Southey dosed himself occasionally for a cold. As we now know, the vicious circle of addiction was not then understood. Sara's first reference to opium is in 1825. She kept a diary of her ill-health which shows that she became addicted by the mid-thirties, and in 1834, the year of Coleridge's death and the year she began *Phantasmion*, she wrote an essay entitled 'Nervousness'. It takes the form of a dialogue between Invalid and Good Genius, and is a remarkably clear analysis of the delicate interrelationship of the mind and the body. By dividing herself into two, she could examine the "disorders which affect the mind but do not radically & directly impair the Reason", so that "Reason, or our own Understanding, overruled by a sense of duty....and aided by grace" could offer sympathy and advice to the distressed Invalid. The writing controls the nervous disorder.

In the same way, the writing of *Phantasmion* controls any violent emotions that may be hidden beneath the text. Lovers, parents and children are not responsible for their lives. Moral choices are set aside. This is not the world of Spenser or

Bunyan. Spirits, like Ariel, sport with "human hopes and purposes". And, like Ferdinand,

[36]

Phantasmion finds that when the "insubstantial pageant" fades, he has survived the test: "Phantasmion looked round in momentary dread, lest Iarine should have proved a spirit and vanished like the rest; but there she stood, her face beaming bright as ever in full sunshine, the earnest that all he remembered and all he hoped for was not to fade like a dream." But his test, forming the vital thread of the whole book, involves much more than being shipwrecked and stacking wood. The story is action-packed: a power struggle shakes a kaleidoscope of battles, storms, deaths, imprisonment in towers or dungeons, poisoning, electric shocks, magic potions, disguise, love and thwarted love, a stolen baby, and lost parents.

Details about Sara's life may make connections, but don't offer explanations. The first passage read last night (pp 17-23 Woodstock edition) might in part be traced to an event at Greta Hall that Mrs Coleridge described in a letter to Tom Poole. The artist, George Dawe, painted a large picture (9'x8') of a "Woman on the point of a High Rock, taking an infant from an Eagle's Nest; the Eagle flying over her head." Mrs Coleridge complained that it was very inconvenient as the weather was cold, and Mr Dawe insisted on the windows being left open so that he could see the true colours of the scene outside. And furthermore, sister Edith was expecting her seventh confinement at any moment. The 9 year-old Sara might well have the drama of the picture and its domestic context in her memory.

The fairy, the queen of the insect world, is an ancient woman with wings who helps Phantasmion throughout. She is called Potentilla, like the flower, signifying "Little Powerful One". She appears to provide him with the imagination of a child to accomplish those feats in which, as an adult, he now wishes to succeed.

The second passage (pp 233-236), where Iarine has just been rescued from a boiling water-spout by a stranger, suggests the depth and complexity of love through the detailed description and measured

[37]

cadence of the sentences. A mixture of chance and magic has brought these two noble individuals into an uneasy relationship, and a similar mixture of chance and magic releases them, rather as the four lovers are manoeuvred in "A Midsummer Night's Dream". In fact this play is referred to elsewhere, when the Fairies' song is re-shaped to question the identification of truth with beauty. The command "Newts and blindworms, do no wrong," is turned into the statement, "Newts and blindworms do no wrong". And "Spotted snakes with double tongue" is changed to "Spotted snakes from guilt are clear". Within the polished and intricate narrative Sara explores the turmoil of love.

She had the highest regard for Wordsworth as a poet, but two of her comments from two different letters written in 1847 are interesting. The first is to

Miss Fenwick: "To my Uncle Southey I owe much - even to his books; to his example, his life and conversation, far more. But to Mr Wordsworth and my father I owe my *thoughts* more than to all other men put together." And the second is to Aubrey de Vere: "Mr Wordsworth was never in love, properly speaking. I have heard him boast of it, in (the) presence of his wife, who smiled angelically, delighted that her husband should be so superior to common men. This superiority, however, entails a certain deficiency. He cannot sympathise with a certain class of feelings in consequence - he cannot realise them. He is always upon stilts when he enters these subjects. He stalks along with a portentous stride & then stamps his great wooden foot down, in the clumsiest manner imaginable... My father, on the other hand, though I say it, that shouldn't say it, was perfect in this line - faultless as Shakespeare, if not as great as Shakespeare, in his representations of women, and the relation of men to women."

In the family relationships in "Phantasmion" it is particularly tempting to look for psycho-biographical details. In his Preface,

[38]

Jonathan Wordsworth writes, "It would be possible...to find significance in Iarine's devotion to her dying father, Albinian (pp317-320). Other father-daughter relationships exist ... out of which something might doubtless be made. But Sara's writing at no point suggests one seeking to compensate for childhood desertion. Her fantasy is unrevealing." So perhaps it is wise just to enjoy the book without giving way to the "depraved craving...for personality" to which Sara objected.

© Contributor 2003 All rights reserved