

‘The very way to be *not read*’^[1] : The Creative Significance of Literary Inconsequentiality in Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion*

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Nineteenth century England never had a single fixed attitude towards the idea of professional women writers. While the likes of George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell and the Brontë sisters wrote in a time when women’s writing was widely read and even ‘silly novels by lady novelists’ were a commonplace, the prevailing attitudes towards women’s writing in the period between 1800 and 1840 were markedly different.

‘Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be.’^[2] wrote Robert Southey to a young Charlotte Brontë. But literature *was* the business of many women’s lives in the first half of the nineteenth century; thousands of women had their writing published^[3] and, for some, despite his apparently misogynistic advice to Brontë, it was only made possible by Southey’s active encouragement. In 1818 Southey helped Caroline Bowles find a publisher for *Ellen Fitzarthur*; between 1831 and 1836 he actively encouraged Anna Eliza Bray to write her *A Description of the Part of Devonshire Bordering of the Tamar and the Tavy*^[4] then wrote it a favourable review in 1836; in 1833 he proof-read Maria Gowen Brooke’s *Zéphiel* which Brooke dedicated to him.^[5]

Clearly Southey found some types of women’s writing permissible and actively encouraged them. His criteria for what was permissible was governed by his sense of what was decorous and feminine. Caroline Bowles wrote out of the financial distress which came about with the death of her parents and could therefore be seen as a hapless (womanly) victim of circumstance; the chapters of Bray’s *Description* were written as letters to Southey and letters were regarded as a woman’s domain. Conversely, Southey refused Wordsworth’s request for a review of Maria Jane Jewsbury’s *Phantasmagoria* in 1825 because Jewsbury wrote aggressively and was probably deemed ‘unfeminine’, especially after her attack on the Southey style of critical review in ‘First Efforts in Criticism’.^[6]

The anti-Jacobin reaction of post-Revolution England, which is often regarded as a stifling force on women’s writing, did not so much suppress women’s writing altogether as impose upon it a rigid set of conservative paradigms.

Sara Coleridge grew up at her Uncle Southey’s house in Keswick and absorbed these paradigms of what was and what was not permissible for women’s writing. Southey had placed women’s writing on the very margins of literature; women wrote (and were to be read) exclusively for light ‘amusement’^[7] and mere ‘recreation from more serious pursuits’^[8]. More so than her three previous works (two of which had been done at Southey’s suggestion^[9]), *Phantasmion* achieved the literary inconsequentiality which was synonymous with Southey’s ideal of women’s writing.

This essay focuses on two main issues: firstly, it looks at how Sara Coleridge actively sought to achieve literary inconsequentiality for *Phantasmion* in adherence with popular conservative paradigms of acceptable femininity; secondly, it examines the creative significance of this inconsequentiality.

Sara’s creative writing was part of an increasingly well-established tradition of women’s writing from the sickbed^[10]. In 1826, Anna B. Jameson’s *Diary of an Ennuyée* was published to much acclaim. Ostensibly the ‘diary is published exactly as it was found after the death of the Author...a real picture of natural and feminine feeling...’^[11] Evidently there was a popular taste for the writings of

ill women since poor health reinforced popular notions of a woman's apparently endearing frailty and ethereality.

In 1834, Sara published *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children*, a collection of poetic learning aids for her son. *Pretty Lessons* was, in Sara's own words, 'a little record of some of my occupations during a season of weakness and suffering'[\[12\]](#). For the most part, *Pretty Lessons* is harmless doggerel but there is one poem, 'Poppies', which has stood out in recent times. The last two verses run thus:

When poor mama long restless lies,
She drinks the poppy's juice;
That liquor soon can close her eyes,
And slumber soft produce:

O then my sweet, my happy boy
Will thank the Poppy-flower,
Which brings the sleep to dear Mama,
At midnight's darksome hour.[\[13\]](#)

Kathleen Jones notes that Sara's brother, Derwent Coleridge, was unhappy with such an explicit reference to his sister's laudanum habit[\[14\]](#). Sara admitted: 'the Poppy poem in 'Pretty Lessons' should have been left out - some other doggerel substituted - but I was poorly.'[\[15\]](#)

'Poppies' represented a turning point in Sara's understanding of self-expression. In the margins of her own copy of Pickering's three-volume edition of *The Poetical Works of S. T. Coleridge*, Sara had written down some of her father's occasional verses. Coleridge's 'Fireside Anacreontic' (containing the lines 'Oh! Jacky, Jacky, Jacky Dandy, / Laudanum's a great improver of Brandy.') was the only poem in those margins never published[\[16\]](#). Sara's own 'Poppies', however, was never removed from subsequent editions of her *Pretty Lessons*[\[17\]](#). Sharing her father's dependency on opium, Sara had openly and unashamedly confessed her addiction to a public audience through poetry - something Coleridge was not allowed to do.

Work on *Phantasmion* began the same year *Pretty Lessons* was published; it seems that Sara wanted to explore more fully the possibilities of self-expression she had found in the inconsequentiality which came hand in hand with being a bedridden woman writing doggerel. *Phantasmion* was, as she told Arabella Brooke,

Chiefly written the winter before I last saw you, when I was more consigned to my couch than I am now; and whether any friends agree with my husband (the most partial of them all) in thinking it is worth publishing or no, they will attach some interest to the volume as a record of some of my recumbent amusements; and be glad to perceive that I often had out-of-door scenes before me in a lightsome, agreeable shape, at a time when I was almost wholly confined to the house, and could view the face of nature only by very short glimpses.[\[18\]](#)

Poetical doggerel, however, was ultimately too inadequate a medium of self-expression for Sara and for *Phantasmion* she chose something different.

Being ill and being female were not the only ways in which Sara secured literary inconsequentiality for *Phantasmion*; she made it a fairy tale and, in doing so, exploited both the changing trends in children's literature she witnessed, as well as her Romantic heritage.

The complex history of the English fairy tale is little understood. But, in order to understand the full impact of *Phantasmion*'s conception, it is important to first examine the changing roles of Fairyland in children's literature.

As that of Romantic Germany, the turn-of the century Fairyland of Southey, Lamb and Coleridge had been the creative space of only a minority, writing in opposition to rationalistic and moralistic values of an emerging bourgeoisie[19]. The Age of Enlightenment, anti-Jacobin conservatism and the Industrial Revolution had together ensured that the morally didactic stories of Edgeworth and what Lamb called 'Mrs Barbauld's stuff' and 'Mrs Trimmer's nonsense'[20] would be the dominant blueprint for children's literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, 'it is surely remarkable that whereas fairy tales had to fight for recognition in the 1820s, no fewer than four different translations of Hans Andersen's stories for children should have been published in England in the year of 1846 alone.'[21] The 1830s was a period of transition for children's literature, a transition exemplified by the career of American author Samuel Goodrich is a perfect exemplum of this transition. 'Starting with *The Tales of Peter Parley about America* (1827) and *The Tales of Peter Parley about Europe* (1828) Goodrich concentrated on producing simple educational works with an emphasis on history and geography.'[22] Yet, in the 1830s, even such an ambassador of 'useful knowledge'[23] with such a vehement dislike of fairy tale[24] brought out *Peter Parley's Book of Fables*. Goodrich, still uncomfortable with fantasy, explained that:

These stories...are not histories; and I do not pretend that these things actually happen. I only imagine them to have happened...I will tell you a story of some mice who talked together and disobeyed their mother, and one of them got his leg torn off in a trap...I do not wish to make you believe that this adventure of the mice actually happened...my real design is to give you lessons of importance.[25]

The 1830s were characterised by mass protests which, in some cases, even led to fatalities.[26] A second generation of readers, brought up in their parents' dream-vision Industrial Revolution, emerged into the nightmare which was that same revolution. This new readership rejected the utilitarian literature of their own childhoods in favour of fairy tale. For the first time in England since the seventeenth century, Fairyland enjoyed sustained mass appeal. However, Victorian Fairyland was different from Romantic Fairyland: instead of insisting on pure imagination, the Victorian audience's expectations were a curious amalgam of rationalistic, moralistic Edgeworthian values and an appetite for the fantastic. Consequently, 'folk tales were rewritten and made into didactic fairy tales for children'[27].

At the same time, the new audience bypassed the problem which Faeryland's irrationality posed to their Enlightenment sensibilities, by fostering a belief in its actual existence, which provided a much needed Otherworld to contrast with the all too dreary industrial landscape. In 1828, Thomas Keightley wrote in his *Fairy Mythology*, 'Belief in Fairies is by no means extinct in England.'[28] and would reaffirm that belief in an expanded edition in 1850. Fairyland became so important that people like Keightley could spend their entire lives in its service: 'It cheers me to reflect that I have not ill employed the talents committed to me,' writes Keightley, 'That I have made additions to English literature and done my duty to my country...'[29]

By 1837, the didactic fairy tale had become an extremely popular genre. Wrote Sara:

It requires no great face to publish now-a-days; it is not stepping upon a stage where the eyes of an audience are upon you but entering a crowd, where you must be very tall, strong, and striking indeed, to obtain the slightest attention. In these days too, to print a fairy tale is the very way to be *not read*, but shoved aside with contempt.[\[30\]](#)

Sara had, in her deliberate choice of genre, ensured her literary inconsequentiality: she was a woman, a bedridden mother, writing 'a mere child's story for the amusement of her little boy'[\[31\]](#) which was a fairy tale, the 'very way to be *not read*' such was the widespread dissemination of fairy on all levels of Victorian culture[\[32\]](#). Furthermore, Sara saw a unique opportunity for self-expression in the fairy tale, writing as she did having grown up within the core of English Romanticism.

As a child, Sara had grown up with fairy tales which were a source of both delight and terror. At Wordsworth's house she shared a bed with her father who woke her at midnight to tell her fairy stories[\[33\]](#); back at Keswick, there were Southey's horror ballads which would make her dread going to bed without her mother.[\[34\]](#) As her father's editor and intellectual heir, Sara inherited notions of an irrational, amoral Fairyland, symbolic of a higher, imagination-based consubstantial universe.[\[35\]](#) 'It is neither in the domains of History or Geography - is ignorant of all artificial boundary', writes Coleridge in one of his notebooks, '- truly in the Land of Faery - i.e. in mental space.'[\[36\]](#)

Sara seems at particular pains to align herself to this Romantic Fairyland. Her letters present a Romantic defence of the apparent amorality of *Phantasmion*. In August 1837, Sara wrote to her brother Derwent suggesting that while *Phantasmion* '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'[\[37\]](#). Derwent continued to complain about *Phantasmion*'s 'want of moral'[\[38\]](#). And he was not the only one who complained.

Sara wrote her husband[\[39\]](#) a 'somewhat laboured defence'[\[40\]](#) of *Phantasmion*'s apparent lack of moral despite the fact 'It was Henry's partiality, not my presumption which brought *Phantasmion* to light. [I would never] have put together such a string of waking dreams'[\[41\]](#). Even more disturbing is how, in the same letter, a 'want of unity' was presented as the main 'defect' of *Phantasmion*[\[42\]](#). It seems Sara wanted him to think it a random 'string of waking dreams', written without forethought and therefore without meaning, let alone a moral.

But there is nothing chaotic or unplanned about *Phantasmion*; if anything, a little too much thought seems to have gone into producing the effect of randomness. Durrant writes of the 'preponderance of confusing detail' which mars the book and that 'the reader inevitably tries to draw mental maps and make connections and soon becomes confused' but that 'there is no doubting that Sara knows all the answers and had worked out the overlapping plots.'[\[43\]](#).

Derwent also referred to an 'overlaid...machinery'. This is understandable: the text most often compared to *Phantasmion* by its readers is Foqué's *Undine*[\[44\]](#) but *Undine* is relatively short compared to *Phantasmion* and *Undine*'s plot is substantially less complex (for example, *Undine* is one love triangle while *Phantasmion* is at least four which are all inter-related). It is my feeling that the 'machinery' Derwent referred to had an equivalent purpose to the poems of *Pretty Lessons* which were not 'Poppies' - it was there to detract from the primary lesson of the volume.

Phantasmion did have a moral; Sara may have been Coleridge's daughter but she was also a Victorian fairy tale writer writing to an audience who expected a moral. Coleridge and Lamb had regarded Fairyland as removed from the 'domains of History and

Geography'[45] but *Phantasmion*, contemporaneous with *Peter Parley*, delivers history and geography in abundance, albeit those of a closed fantasy.[46] Working with the assumption that her readers would look for a moral and then ostensibly denying them one[47] provided the unique opportunity to teach a lesson far more subversive and more culturally unacceptable than anything found in her *Pretty Lessons*.

If, as a mother, Sara had much to say to children, as a woman she had more. 'Women seldomer write a bad style than men,' Sara confides in her diary, 'what they produce is genuine as far as it goes, and they generally write because they have something to tell rather than for the mere sake of vanity.'[48] In modern times it has been noted that: 'The displacement of neurosis through fantasy, in particular, enables the creative imagination to escape external censors precisely because it appears to be nothing but fantasy and is, as children's literature, in any case not to be taken too seriously by those who have academic interests in literature.'[49]

The neuroses Sara displaced in her fantasy were her thoughts and feelings about love and this is why Henry attacked *Phantasmion* after he had called for its publication. In 1846, Sara acknowledged this as *Phantasmion*'s main theme in a mock-history of how she applied to Venus for help, without success.

Coarse-minded thing! [Venus] can't endure Fairyland, where the lovers are as fine as mists, and the ladies evanescent as rainbows. She admires heavy bulks, downright, visible, tangible wretches, and would have the very ladies perceptible to the mere unpurged visual orb...There ought to be a Venus Fairylandensis, abiding between earth and heaven, to assist writers of fairy tales...[50]

To Sara, that Fairyland was her childhood. 'Tender and delicate'[51] from the age of two, Sara constantly conveyed to others an ethereal, otherworld quality. At nine she was her father's 'sweet-tempered, meek, blue-eyed Fairy'[52]. Later, a fifteen year old Sara was captured on canvas by William Collins. The painting 'was rapturously described as 'a form of compacted light, not of flesh and blood', the model 'designated the 'Flower of the Lakes' and 'Sylph of Ullswater'. [53] 'Sara was always so completely unique, so perfectly a Fairy,' recalls Hartley Coleridge, 'a being belonging neither to time or space, so like the ethereal vehicle of a pure spirit, a visible soul...' [54] In his contribution to *Memoir and Letters* Sir Henry Taylor writes 'her reasoning faculty....was less to me than the beauty and simplicity and feminine tenderness of her face.'[55]

It was a beauty which could not but remain in one's memory for life...the features were perfectly shaped, and almost minutely delicate, and the complexion delicate also, but not wanting in colour, and the general effect was that of gentleness, indeed I may say of composure, even to stillness. Her eyes were large, and they had [a] sort of serene lustre...[56]

Always the fairy, Sara was, because of her burdensome beauty, constantly surrounded by the gaze of the 'unpurged visual orb[s]' of goggling 'downright, visible, tangible wretches' and 'visible fool[s]' [57]. Sara did not like being looked at (since her 'reasoning faculty' was invariably subordinated to her beauty) nor did she like being touched - Sara 'was not caressing in manner, nor did she encourage any demonstrativeness in those around her. But this does not imply that she was in the least degree cold or indifferent.'[58]

Accordingly, the love of Sara's Venus Fairylandensis is presented without sexual contact. All the characters (except, obviously, the evil protagonists) are astonishingly beautiful but their beauty is never what makes them loved and is almost never a source of jealousy[59]. Erotic touch between characters is heavily penalised in *Phantasmion*. Consider, for example, the episode in which Zelneth has been attempting to attract the Phantasmion's attention:

Then she bowed her head, and one of her massy tresses fell upon the prince's hand. He started from his reverie, and beheld the lovely Zelneth looking at him with eyes full of love and sorrow, tears on her cheek, and her wild locks, which had broken from restraint, falling in careless abandonment on the ground where she knelt. Again he blushed and smiled, and his was a face on which smiles and blushes appeared to have a tenfold meaning, as sunny weather in a land of flowery meads and crystal waters seems tenfold sunnier than a barren plain. (91)[60]

Both touching and seeing become open to misinterpretation and, although Sara is sympathetic towards Zelneth and her unrequited love, Zelneth is ultimately hurt and left 'weeping on her sister's bosom' at the end of chapter, crying, in metaphors that suggest sexual desire, 'O Leucoia!...thy channel was once full, though now the stream is dried at the fountain: but mine has ever been despised, unvisited: the current winds another way, and will not flow there.'(95) Physical touch with erotic overtones, wanting another's physical admiration - such are the crimes in *Phantasmion*.

It is not surprising, then, that it is Seshelma, the evil 'fishy woman'(44), who does the only excessively erotic touching in the book. In Book I, chapter VI, Phantasmion, while standing on the river bank, 'felt something cold and slimy touching his foot between the straps of the sandal, and soon a slippery hand glided up his leg where it was bare, the tight vest having been rent by thorns during his journey. Phantasmion had no time to consider what this might be, for the touch was as that of a torpedo, and he had received an electrical shock which benumbed his whole body.'(44) The touch is near-fatal and in the next chapter, 'Phantasmion felt as if his limbs were frozen'(45) In *Phantasmion*, as in Sara's life, sexual contact brings ill health. To be undemonstrative is not to be 'cold or indifferent'; though Seshelma may be the character most inclined to touch, she cannot feel - when Phantasmion strikes her with his sword in retaliation, her eyes 'seemed to express more of slow malice than of any keen sensation.'(44)

Seeing Sara's Fairyland as her childhood wishes turned into reality is a useful way of reading *Phantasmion*. Lady Beaumont, the wife of Wordsworth's patron, thought Sara 'a delicate little sylph...she would represent our ideas of Psyche or Ariel... but she looks so delicate I should tremble at her becoming a wife or mother'[61]. Yet, by 1837, Sara *was* both wife and mother. In 1829, Sara had married Henry who once wrote in her commonplace book, 'Sex...I am sick for complete union', had argued that Sara's notion of non-physical love was 'not human', that it 'falsely denies the body and its needs'[62] and, in 1832, refused Sara the respite from childbearing she desperately wanted[63]. Sexual intercourse, the pressure of continual childbearing, the death of two of babies in 1834, and severe post-natal depression left Sara's naïve Fairyland vision of 'lovers fine as mists' shattered.

'What we dwell constantly upon we are bound to magnify'[64] and Sara dwelt on her high ideals of Petrarchan love and the reality she was confronted with. As a child, Sara had not wanted to kiss her father: 'I remember his showing displeasure to me, and accusing me of want of affection...that you are dunned for some payment of love or feeling which you know not how to produce or to demonstrate on a sudden, chills the heart, and fills it with perplexity and

bitterness.’[65] Whether she was being made to kiss her father or being forced to make love to her husband Sara felt the same emotional strain.

‘I would never say “Alas - why don’t you love me?”’ wrote Sara, ‘Love is an emotion and cannot be compelled...’[66] Sara felt people should love only if their emotions compelled them to, and such love did not need to be proved by kisses or love-making. It is an idea reiterated in *Phantasmion*. At one point, Karadan begs for Iarine’s love:

“If thou couldst understand but half the intensity of my anguish, I know that, out of tenderness and compassion, thou wouldst learn to love me...Promise that thou wilt try to love me, and I will go hence the happiest man that ever loved and hoped...Only try to love me...” “Dear cousin,” answered the maid, “we have duties enough which nature imposes; for a heart like mine I am sure they are sufficient; *never let us make a duty of love.*”(159, my emphasis)

Although such an attitude towards love may have been regarded with contention in the nineteenth century, for Sara it was the innocent fairy-love she knew as a child. Accordingly, in *Phantasmion*, Sara explains the nature of love further and suggests that her arguably more sincere love springs from the innocence of childhood itself.

Phantasmion being, in part, a vision of childhood, ignores the traditional adult values of the real world, presenting, instead, a world dominated by the feelings and compulsions of childhood, a world overseen by fairies, ‘freakish and sudden as children, yet steadfast in revenge as the sternest of mankind’(137). “Be thou guided by me, and I will serve thee against all thy foes without guerdon. Dorimant scorned my words and I left him to his fate.”(136) Potentilla tells Phantasmion. To refuse the help of these fairies, to deny their place in *Phantasmion* results in an unnatural death like King Dorimant’s.

Phantasmion is a fantastical place where one must regress and rediscover the ‘delights and wonders of childhood’, in order to mature. Potentilla’s magic allows Phantasmion to do this and make the transition from prince to king. Upon their first encounter, Potentilla explains her role in Phantasmion’s life.

“My little Phantasmion, thou needest no fairy now to work wonders for thee, being yet so young that all thou beholdest is new and marvellous to thine eyes. But the day must come when this happiness will fade away...[Then,] I will appear before thee, and exert all my power to renew the delights and wonders of thy childhood.”(4)

Phantasmion’s source of childlike delight comes from the magical grafting on of various insect appendages onto him. Once more he takes on the role of child-pupil; like ‘an eagle teaching her young ones to fly’, Potentilla teaches Phantasmion to use his wings, ‘who timidly followed where she led the way, trembling in his first career’. Having mastered the art of flying, ‘He thought it a delightful novelty...’(13) Potentilla’s next gift, the suckers of flies on Phantasmion’s feet, delights Phantasmion in a similar way. “This gift pleased Phantasmion well, and he spent the remainder of that day in gliding along the walls and over the vaulted ceilings of the palace...”(18)

Even at the beginning of Book II in which Phantasmion scares the pirates off the coast of Palmland with his supernatural water-beetle disguise, he first decides to ‘walk at the bottom of the

sea, as long as he could remain there without taking breath' and, only 'having enjoyed enough of this pastime'(138), does he decide to carry out his plans for the pirate ships.

Yet the butterfly is the adult of its life-cycle, and intrinsic to the fantastical image of Phantasmion flying on his butterfly wings is an image of adulthood. While Potentilla's magic may have developmentally regressive effects, it also has developmentally progressive effects. On receiving his butterfly wings, Phantasmion's 'full eyes...beamed with joyful expectation, while more than childlike bloom rose mantling to his cheek.'(12) This description primarily attempts to convey the delight of a child, but it is '*more* than childlike bloom' which is described. It is the introduction of fairy-love which makes Phantasmion's experience transcend the regressive. *Phantasmion* love, the paradoxical union of *eros* and *agape*, is at once both childlike and adult: it is a manifestation of sexual love in a world governed by fairies who are as 'freakish and sudden as children, yet steadfast in revenge as the sternest of mankind' like adults.

Phantasmion's magical endowments, capable of arousing 'more than childlike bloom', are almost always associated with gaining Iarine's hand.[\[67\]](#) The first gift of butterfly wings is intrinsically linked to Phantasmion's dream of the angelic face in the clouds. In his dream under the pomegranate tree, 'a group of angel faces shone before him', and his demand for wings is given in the 'vague hope that he might once more behold that heavenly face' which 'grew more and more exquisite' in his dream. Phantasmion chooses his wings from the butterflies which Potentilla summons, 'those angel insects pouring from every region of the heavens'. The delightful novelty of flight and Iarine are yoked together by the same diction; both are 'angelic', both 'heavenly'. Phantasmion's crash landing on the shore reveals more about that heavenly face. Overhearing Maudra and Seshelma talking, Phantasmion

Could not help in some sort connecting it with his heavenly dream. A lady, young and beautiful, was hated and persecuted: powers of earth and sea were leagued against her; he pictured this fair Iarine with the countenance which he had beholden in the vision. (17)

Then Phantasmion's fly-sucker feet enable him to climb the Mount of Eagles where he first meets Iarine in the flesh and rescues her baby brother Eurelio and allows him also to break the book's unwritten rules about sexual contact; his powers permit him to carry Iarine in his arms down the crag without any other penalty than her look of astonishment (22) - it is permitted because what Iarine beholds is new and marvellous to her eyes (4). The first chapter of Book II may be primarily concerned with Phantasmion's treatment of the pirates off Palmland's coasts but is nevertheless entitled 'Phantasmion rescues the infant brother of Iarine'.

Potentilla's magic has this regressive-progressive effect because of the underlying mechanism upon which it is founded. Potentilla's magic is an instrument for wish-fulfilment. This is particularly stressed particularly by Albinet's wishes after Maudra has imprisoned Iarine in the tower of her castle in the chapter entitled 'Glandreth quits the island, and Phantasmion obtains and interview with Iarine'.

"Alas! alas!" cried the child; "it is so dark here! - if I had wings I would fly in at the window which opens upon the lawn." Phantasmion descended the stairs, and soon discovered the window spoken of by Albinet, then, loosing his wings, he flew up to it...(174)

It is Potentilla's magic which enables Phantasmion to act out the childish desires of Albinet, confirming that what we see in the adventures of *Phantasmion* is desire unrestricted by anything, save the limitations of the child's imagination, coupled with the capability of fulfilling them.

It is not just Potentilla's magic which does this; the function of all the magic in *Phantasmion* is to fulfil inner wishes. This is most apparent in Book III which contains the greatest concentration of magical acts. In Zelneth's account of her going to Glandreth's castle to free Phantasmion, one solution to putting an end to her unrequited love for the king is offered by the silver-veiled Melledine in the form of a drink which 'would make [Zelneth] cease to love and cease to feel such sorrow'. Yet Zelneth does not wish this but, in the spirit of the childlike mentality of all of *Phantasmion*, requests the granting of a more impulsive, passionate wish: "Ask me not to drown the remembrance either of those I love or those I hate: rather offer me a charm by which I may gain the heart of Phantasmion, and triumph over my false rival." (228)

Malderyl promises 'to bring Phantasmion to [Zelneth's] feet'(229) but, ironically, she uses a similar, perhaps identical 'forgetful cup' of drink that Melledine offered, 'a precious liquor...[that] takes away all sense of toil and pain'(246). Far from refusing it, Zelneth becomes its coinesseuse - 'Malderyl, add nothing more; it cannot be better.'(246) she cries having tasted it.

Surprisingly, there is no supernatural deception involved with Phantasmion's falling in love with Zelneth. The liquid is not a love potion and does nothing but 'take away all sense of toil and pain'. 'All remembrance of the past, all anticipation of the future [are] completely suspended' for Phantasmion and his love for Zelneth emerges from that lack of remembrance or anticipation. Under the influence of the concoction,

In a moment he was electrified with delight, a rapturous tranquillity pervading his whole frame: he felt intoxicated with pleasure which sprang from no cause and tended to no object, yet was ever ready to be reflected and multiplied from all objects around: he seemed incapable of thinking and happier than any thought could make him. (246)

Governed by Venus Fairylandensis, it is an uncomplicated love, springing from a sense of the 'delights and wonders of childhood' - or even babyhood for Phantasmion's pleasure is 'reflected and multiplied from all objects around'. Looking upon Zelneth with new-found fondness, Phantasmion is 'as an infant [that] lies in his cradle watching every motion of her whom he loves fondly, but unconsciously, free from the burden of esteem, and obligation of gratitude.' (248) Phantasmion's brief love for Zelneth is an 'unconscious' love and rather like the love which Sara attempts to teach her children about. No 'burden of esteem' or 'obligation' enters the equation; the love does not end in marriage but this makes it no less valid. Before Zelneth, 'Phantasmion threw himself onto his knees, ready to utter vows of eternal love and faithfulness, having forgotten those he had made to Iarine, as if they had been characters formed in ice, which a hot sun had melted away.'(252)

The love Phantasmion feels for Zelneth is solely a love of the moment. He is ready to utter vows of eternal love but, as the extract shows, eternal vows can be forgotten and made void. However, the reader never suspects sincerity of these eternal vows. Phantasmion's vows are expressions of feelings of the moment; he may mean them to last forever when he utters them, but only for as long as the intensity of the love, which inspired such vows, remains to justify such strong expressions.

It is not surprising that the reader may misinterpret Malderyl's potion as a love potion for the effects are so striking that it may as well be. A little later on in Book III in chapter VII, Zelneth

convinces herself that it is a love potion even though she of all should know of its effects, being the coinesseuse that she is. Malderyl offers her an unknown potion and,

Zelneth suspected that the liquor presented to her was some of that which had been prepared in the cavern, and that Malderyl's design was to make her return the chieftain's passion; nevertheless she took the cup and slowly drank, with her eyes fixed on the features of Penselimer. (276)

Zelneth drinks the potion in Phantasmion's absence with her eyes firmly fixed onto the portrait of Penselimer which had been 'carelessly hung around her baby neck'(276) by Anthemmina and, immediately, 'Her visions of childhood rose again in all their keen aerial colours.'(277) The love Zelneth's love for Penselimer is one of childhood matured, rooted firmly a time when Zelneth 'was but a laughing babe' though she is 'no babe now'(303).

Melledine's colourless domain provides a chance to delve into Phantasmion's dreams. The enchantress's music lulls him into a waking sleep,

He began to dream with his eyes open, and beheld the face of Iarine in that of Leucoia. He fancied himself on the Black Lake, and the radiance of the moon seemed to his eyes the same soft sunlight which had shone upon his last interview with the island princess. (288)

With overtones of IV.iv of *The Taming of the Shrew*[\[68\]](#) the passage hints of willing self-deception are to be found in chapter IX. For a brief time, Phantasmion supposes that he lives out his innermost fantasies when in fact he does not.

Phantasmion dreamed that all which had passed, since he plighted his faith to Iarine under the sunny rainbow, was but a dream: he took from his bosom her glossy ringlet, which had been twined with rubies to form a crown for his brow, and, placing it on Leucoia's head, while he whispered vows of changeless love, he bade her wear it for his sake till she was queen of Palmland. (288)

This entire episode deliberately serves as an episode for illuminating comparison with Phantasmion's falling in love with Zelneth. Phantasmion's relationships with both sisters are brought about by deception; for Phantasmion's part, his emotions are genuine and his expressions of love sincere, but the sister's are offered contrived and, ultimately, deceiving, roles of artifice by the enchantresses. On Phantasmion's waking in Malderyl's subterranean garden, 'a splendid picture was hung out before him' in which Zelneth is 'placed at a coy distance...the very subject of the piece'(251).

Under Melledine's spell, Phantasmion sees the image of Iarine superimposed onto Leucoia. 'Melledine looked earnestly at Leucoia, with her finger on her lips, and entreated her, in low breathed strains of melody, to bear at least a silent part in this deception.'(289) 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 lend their influence but, in the final analysis, no amount of magic, no amount of wishing, can bring a relationship between two people into being without the consent of both involved.

“...Perchance thou art wise to cease contending in this cause, for who can alter the fixed purposes of fate? There are spirits of the flood that can see into futurity”-”Did they tell thee of her I love?” interrupted Karadan, with vehemence; “shall the maid be mine?” “Never!” answered Seshelma, and again she laughed...(206)

Seshelma may revel in Karadan’s misfortune but she is also being completely honest about the ‘fixed purposes of fate’. The prophecies of the spirits of the flood make a mockery of the idea behind Anthemmina’s silver pitcher. Karadan’s possession of the pitcher does nothing to guarantee him Iarine’s hand in marriage even though it is meant to do exactly that. Towards the end of the book it is revealed that Anthemmina is still alive and this does nothing to add credibility of the pitcher’s magical powers - Anthemmina is never affected by Karadan’s possession of the pitcher, never bound to marry only him and, while she lives, the pitcher has no effect on Iarine’s life. ‘Feydeleen decreed that after Anthemmina’s time the fortunes of her child should depend upon it, as hers did before?’(113) Laona asks Phantasmion - but throughout the book, it is taken that this is indeed the case, except by Penselimer, who believes that he can marry the deceased Anthemmina in heaven if only he can regain possession of the pitcher.

The enchanted pitcher is the greatest fallacy of *Phantasmion*. Yet the revelation of its lack of power and its uselessness (except in carrying preserves) is one of the book’s greatest criticisms. The symbolic potential of the pitcher is intriguing. In Anthemmina’s time, it attempts to be a means by which she can choose the husband she herself desires but soon the pitcher becomes not a symbol of liberation from marriages with undesired suitors, but a symbol of her hand in marriage, to be used as a piece of currency amongst men.

In denying any effect of the pitcher on Iarine’s life, Sara frees her heroine from the assumption that she must “belong” to someone. Iarine is not a woman to be “possessed”; she loves her invalid father but will not promise to marry Karadan on his account; she loves Maudra’s baby but will not feel compelled to marry Phantasmion because he rescues it. It is Iarine who utters the central lesson of the book, ‘Never let us make a duty of love’. Iarine is compelled to love because of her ‘wayward will’, and acts on that love since she is not bound by any obligation to the contrary.

Even when she finally does commit herself to Phantasmion, Iarine is surprisingly noncommittal: “Farewell!” she said, “when next we meet thou mayst fasten the chain on me; and, if it binds me to thyself, believe that I will gladly wear it even to my life’s end.”(202) Iarine’s words are such that they assume nothing. She does not assume that Phantasmion will certainly continue to love her at their next meeting but will accept his love should this be the case; wary of her mother’s past, she says she will ‘gladly wear’ ‘the chain’ only if it binds her to him, as opposed to some other. Her vow of lifelong commitment implies that most will wear ‘the chain’ for a limited length of time, hence ‘even to my life’s end’. What is significant, however, is that Iarine undermines the sincerity of her words - ‘Believe that I will gladly wear it,’ she says. Iarine never speaks of her love for Phantasmion; her love is the undemonstrative, understated love which Sara herself approved of. Edith Coleridge explores this demonstrativeness further and unearths the true feelings beneath this visible lack of affection: ‘Once, when I was taken with some childish illness, I saw a look of terror on her face, and thought, with a sudden strange sense of awe, ‘Does mama care for me as much as that?’[69]

The very structure of the book seems to approve of this demonstrativeness. Unlike other fairy tales, the reader never gets to see the nuptials of Phantasmion and Iarine. Book IV is unusually short in terms of number of chapters compared with the other three books, suggesting that the fairy tale has been prematurely ended; no applause of mass approval welcomes the couple into the country

and the reader can only ever imagine the marriage of Phantasmion and Iarine, and never even begins to give a thought to Iarine's response to Phantasmion's love-making.

Hidden in *Phantasmion*'s machinery, from the eyes of Sara's husband, family and intentionally small reading public [70], is its purpose: the promotion of a pre-sexual, undemonstrative, unobliging love which springs from neither duty nor coy design, but from spontaneous affection. But such a purpose does not need to be hidden from today's readers; this essay has sought to redress the balance of a book 'indifferently received' [71] in its own time, 'almost unknown or forgotten' [72] by 1874 and to this day seldom read. However, there is an immense amount of work to be done in before the complexity of Sara and the richness of her *Phantasmion* vision are fully realised. Authoritative studies of literature of the 1800-1840 period, studies of the development of children's literature in England, and of the curious history of English folklore and fairy tale have yet to be written, besides which the world has yet to see the fullness and diversity of Sara Coleridge's papers. Until then, Sara Coleridge will be 'like *Claribel*...unfinished' and *Phantasmion* will remain the 'very way to be not read' [73]

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[1] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge* 2 vols (London, 1874), I. 175.

[2] *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey, (London, 1849-50), p.327-9 for the full text which, unlike the selected quotations from biographers such as E. Gaskell, offers a more encouraging, humane and liberal Southey. Both B. K. Mudge and K. Jones, cited later in this essay, use only the quotation I have used in an attempt to portray a society vehemently against women's writing.

[3] S. Curran, ed., 'Women readers, women writers', in *The Cambridge Companion To British Romanticism* ed. S. Curran (Cambridge, 1993), p.179.

[4] See introduction to A. E. Bray's *The Borders of the Tamar and the Tavy* (London, 1879) for a history of the conception of the book.

[5] Southey thought it the best poem America had produced (see C. C. Southey's *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* 6 vols (London, 1849-50), VI. 232 and Southey reviewed it in *The Doctor &c.* calling it the 'most passionate and imaginative of any poem ever written by a female' (see Introduction to *Zóphiel, or the Bride of Seven* (Boston, 1834), p. v.).

[6] M. C. Fryckstedt, 'The Hidden Rill: The Life and Career of Maria Jane Jewsbury', *The John Rylands University Library* 67(1984), 177-201 (p.193). Fryckstedt wrongly supposes that Jewsbury takes a masculine persona and does not recognise that there are parts of *Phantasmagoria* where the narrator is undeniably female.

[7] Southey quoted in B. K. Mudge, *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (London, 1989), p.26.

[8] A. E. Bray, 'Advertisement', *A Peep at the Pixies*, (London, 1854).

9 I refer to *An Account of the Abipones, an Equestrian People of Paraguay. A translation from the Latin of Martin Dobritzshoffer*, 3 vols, (London, 1822) and *The right joyous and pleasant History of the feats, jests and prowesses of the Chevalier Bayard, the good knight without fear and without reproach. By the Loyal Servant*, translated from the French of J de Mailles, 2 vols (London, 1825).

[10] The tradition continued well into the nineteenth century. The life and career of Elizabeth Barrett is an outstanding example.

[11] A. B. Jameson, *Diary of an Ennyée*, (London, 1826), p. 1.

[12] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 97.

[13] S. Coleridge, *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children; with some lessons in Latin in easy rhyme*, (London, 1825, repr. 1853), p. 74

[14] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: the sisters, wives and daughters of the Lake Poets* (London, 1997), p. 238.

[15] B. K. Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, p. 67. The excuse for writing things ordinarily not permissible was also used in a letter to Arabella Brooke: in 1839 Sara wrote, 'All this is excusable in me, because I am poorly.' (E. Coleridge's *Memoir and Letters*, p. 232.)

[16] D. Woolf, 'Sara Coleridge's Marginalia', *The Coleridge Bulletin* 2(1993), 5-14 (p. 14). Woolf writes that Sara's copy of the 1834 Pickering edition is lodged at Coleridge Cottage, presumably the cottage at Nether Stowey, Somerset.

[17] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. 238.

[18] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 174.

[19] J. Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales*, (1977; repr. New York, 1992), p. 26.

[20] E. Towle, *A Poet's Children*, (London, 1912), p. 175.

[21] D. Butts, 'How Children's Literature Changed: What Happened in the 1840s?', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 21.2 (1997), 153-162 (pp. 161-2).

[22] D. Butts, 'How Children's Literature Changed', p.154. Butt expands on the nature of the Parley phenomenon and the extent of its utilitarianism: 'F. J. Harvey Darton identified no fewer than six different authors who issued books under Goodrich's pseudonym, such as *Peter Parley's Visit to London, during the Coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838*. *Peter Parley's Magazine*, which ran from 1839-1863, and *Peter Parley's Annual* (1840-1892) also contained many articles about history, travel and science which asserted the importance of factual information for young readers.'

[23] S. Coleridge, *Phantasmion: a fairy tale* (London, 1874), p. v

[24] In his autobiography, *Recollections of a Lifetime*, he wrote that 'These tales were calculated to familiarize the mind with things shocking and monstrous; to cultivate a taste for tales of bloodshed and violence; to teach the young to use coarse language and cherish vulgar ideas; to erase from the young heart tender and gentle feelings....' quoted in M. I. West's 'Toward a Reappraisal of the Views of Early American Children's Authors concerning Fantasy Literature', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 22.2 (1998), 141-146 (p. 142).

[25] S. G. Goodrich, *Peter Parley's Book of Fables* (Hartford, CT, 1850), p.7-8 quoted in M. I. West's 'Toward a Reappraisal of the Views of Early American Children's Authors concerning Fantasy Literature', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 22.2 (1998), 141-146 (p. 142).

[26] Butts gives a list of evidence to show the 1830s as a decade of disillusionment. He writes, 'The rapidly growing towns and the appalling conditions in them the stresses of the factory-system,, the decline in agriculture, the inadequacies of public education all produced tensions and agitation manifested by such recurring public outbursts as the rural "Swing Riots" of the 1820s, the mass-meetings to urge parliamentary reform in the 1830s, the growth of the Chartist movement, and the great protests calling for the Repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s. The fatalities sustained at "Peterloo," the transportation of the "Tolpuddle Martyrs" in 1834, and the Newport Rising of 1839 which left at least a dozen Chartists dead as well as fifty wounded, are all evidence of the Bleak Age and the picture of a society on the edge of catastrophe.' ('How Children's Literature Changed', p. 158).

[27] J. Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell*, p. 15.

[28] quoted in Ambrose Merton's letter to *Athenæum*, (1846), p.886.

[29] T. Keightley's *Fairy Mythology* (London, 1850), p. xii.

[30] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 175.

[31] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 43.

[32] For a survey of the use of Fairy in various different aspects of Victorian culture, see A. Packer's *Fairies in Legend & the Arts*, (London, 1986), K. M. Briggs' *The Fairies: The Fairies in English tradition and literature*, (London, 1989) and The Royal Academy of Arts' *Victorian Fairy Painting* ed. J. Martineau (London, 1997) which, as well as dealing with painting, has essays on fairy literature, music and book illustration.

[33] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 18.

[34] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 25.

[35] For a full-length discussion of Coleridge's use of Fairy see J. Watson's *Risking Enchantment: Coleridge's Symbolic World of Faery* (Lincoln [USA] and London, 1990).

[36] quoted in J. Watson's *Risking Enchantment*,

[37] E. L. Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, p.117.

[38] Unpublished letter from Derwent to Mrs Coleridge (19 November 1837) lodged at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin [hereafter referred to as HRC UTA] quoted in Cherry Durrant's *The Lives and Works of Hartley, Derwent and Sara Coleridge*, p. 329.

[39] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I.190.

[40] E. Towle, *A Poet's Children*, p.182.

[41] E. L. Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, p.116.

[42] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I.190.

[43] C. Durrant, *The Lives and Works of Hartley, Derwent and Sara Coleridge*, pp.327-8. Perhaps Durrant would not have been so harsh had she seen 'Map of Phantasmion' - an autographed manuscript lodged in the HRC UTA. See p. 22 of HRC's *Manuscript Holdings of Selected Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* available on the Net at www.indiana.edu/~victoria/wolff.html

[44] 'Nothing has appeared in this species of writing...to be for one moment compared with 'Phantasmion,' since Foquè [sic] produced his inimitable 'Undine.' (Memoir and Letters, p. 42) writes an American critic'. Sara Coleridge herself said *Phantasmion* 'belongs to that class of fictions, of which Robinson Crusoe, Peter Wilkins, Faust, Undine...and many other fairy tales are instances' (Ibid., p.191); Eleanor Towle thinks these a curious choice of texts to, though admits that 'the resemblance to "Undine"...is more apparent.' (*A Poet's Children*, p.183); John Duke Coleridge writes that 'The Legends of Nip, and the exquisite fancy of Undine are [its] nearest prototypes' (*Phantasmion, a fairy tale*, p.vi); in *The Lives and Works of Hartley, Derwent and Sara Coleridge*, Durrant has attempted to see the German *kunstmärchen*, (*Undine* particularly), as a possible source of inspiration. (p. 322). Durrant cites a letter from Southey to George Ticknor thanking him, on behalf of his niece, for 'the sweet story of *Undine* which is surely the most graceful fiction of modern times'. I have since located Sara's copy of *Undine*, published by E. Littel in Philadelphia (1824), currently lodged in the British Library (shelfmark: C.132.c.9).

[45] In 1802, Lamb writes to Coleridge: 'Science has succeeded to poetry no less in the walks of little children than with man Is there no way of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with Tales and old men's fables in childhood you had been crammed with geography and natural history?' (quoted in E. Towle's *A Poet's Children*, p.176).

[46] The term is John Goldthwaite's and refers to fantasies written wholly within an imaginary world (such as Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*). See *The Natural History of Make-Believe: A Guide to the Principal Works of Britain, Europe, and America*. (New York, Oxford, 1996). The greatest concentration of *Phantasmion's* history and geography is located in Book I, chap. 5 (25-27) but such material is scattered throughout the book.

[47] It seems that many of *Phantasmion's* readers formed their opinion around its lack of moral meaning of. John Duke Coleridge writes 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 onto to write about how *Phantasmion* lacked 'general purpose and meaning.'

[48] MS HRC UTA, Diary 1835, quoted in Cherry's Durrant's *The Lives and Works of Hartley, Derwent and Sara Coleridge*, p.317.

[49] "Censorship in Children's Literature." *Para.doxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 2.3-4 (1996) Alleen Pace Nilsen and Hamida Bosmajian, eds. reviewed and quoted in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 22.2 (1998), 244-250

[50] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I.380

[51] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I.6.

- [52] B. K. Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, p. .20.
- [53] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. .202.
- [54] B. K. Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, p. .28
- [55] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 29.
- [56] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I. 28
- [57] Sara's insult quoted in B. K. Mudge's *Sara Coleridge*, p.28.
- [58] E. Coleridge, *Some Recollections of Henry Nelson Coleridge and his Family*, (Torquay, 1910), p.10.
- [59] The exception is when Maudra has Iarine cut her hair off because she is too beautiful. However, Maudra's ugliness, like that of Melledine, Malderyl and Seshelma, is one which comes from a corrupt heart rather than a purely aesthetic ugliness.
- [60] All page references are taken from Jonathan Wordsworth's facsimile *Phantasmion* 1837 and shall hereafter be included parenthetically within the text for ease of reference.
- [61] B. K. Mudge, *Sara Coleridge*, p. 28.
- [62] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. 211.
- [63] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. 230.
- [64] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters*, I.122.
- [65] E. Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters* , I.18.
- [66] K. Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p. 232.
- [67] Except when Phantasmion requests 'the means of sudden vengeance' upon learning that Glandreth has had his mother's body exhumed at the beginning of Book IV.
- [68] Sara had read all of Shakespeare in the 1830s. See K. Jones' *A Passionate Sisterhood*, p.231.
- [69] E. Coleridge, *Some Recollections*, p.10.
- [70] Sara herself admitted that would appeal to only a comparatively small readership, writing, '[Its] likers, if any, [will be] among the youthful boys and girls in teens or under - those in whom fancy is a more active power than judgment, and whose own state of mind lends a glow and a novelty to that which seems too fantastic, yet not over-original to them who have had more experience in life and literature.' (Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, p.117)
- [71] E. L. Griggs, *Coleridge Fille*, p. 120
- [72] S. Coleridge, *Phantasmion: a fairy tale*, p.iv
- [73] V. Woolf, 'Sara Coleridge', *Collected Essays* III (London, 1967), p.224.