

Mary Robinson and the Abyssinian Maid: Coleridge's Muses and Feminist Criticism

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ACCORDING to Thomas De Quincey, the poetics of Romanticism were organised around a gender opposition: 'the Sublime in contraposition to the Beautiful, grew up on the basis of *sexual* distinction—the Sublime corresponding to the male, and the Beautiful, its anti-pole, corresponding to the female'. The principal proponent of these gendered poetics was Edmund Burke, for whom the sublime was characterised by the masculine traits of power, terror, strength, greatness, and the beautiful by the feminine qualities of softness, sympathy, beauty and feeling.[1] Burke's view of the feminine was criticised by the contemporary feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued that it amounted, when used to define women's social role, to a prescription for libertinism.[2] Burke's views, she asserted, rendered women helpless, ill-educated beings. Valued (if at all) only for their bodily appearance and compliance, they were rejected when their looks faded because men found them mentally dull. No longer entranced by their beauty, men became contemptuous of the very weakness they had encouraged women to adopt. They cast them off, to replace them with other mistresses whose weakness was still attractively accompanied by beauty. In the process, both men and women were degraded. Inequality was perpetuated; men became tyrants, women became victims.

Coleridge was briefly a friend of Wollstonecraft. He was, in the 1790s, a political enemy of Burke. But he was not a feminist. Despite his political differences from the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he viewed the feminine in a way similar to its author. And, according to a number of recent critics, he adopted a Burkean view of the feminine in his poetry. His poetry and poetics, it is suggested, borrowed a gendered sublime and beautiful, in order to empower the masculine and disempower the feminine. The male poet, it is argued, was the principal beneficiary. He became sublime, whereas he made of the female a beautiful but subordinate muse. Marlon B. Ross, for instance, sees Coleridge as participating in male Romanticism's struggle for a transcendent 'power of self-possession, a power that is repeatedly willed in the poetry by both overt and subliminal appeals to the virility and masculinity of his creative project'.[3] For Mary Jacobus, this poetic power was gained at the expense of the feminine, and at women's cost. She shows that in Wordsworth's poetry Dorothy is enlisted as a muse, only for her insights and words to be absorbed into Wordsworth's contemplation of his own superior genius.[4] For Anne K. Mellor, the silencing of Dorothy and that of the Abyssinian maid is paradigmatic of the procedure of male Romantics: they effect an absorption of the feminine which leaves it—and the women who feature in their work—'cannibalised and enslaved'.[5] Margaret Homans declares that Wordsworthian Romantic poetry 'states most compellingly the traditional myth . . . of woman's place in language as the silent or vanished object of male representation and quest'.[6] The male Romantics, in other words, far from being opponents of the gender inequality which Burke, and the social order he defended, perpetuated, were complicit with his defence—and with the social order itself (at least in so far as it concerned women). They were not, in this area, radicals, and if they were not libertines they were, in their poetry, tyrants.

In what follows I want to take issue with the idea that Coleridge participates in a cannibalisation and enslavement of the feminine.[7] By investigating the poetics of 'Kubla Khan' and the implications of his verse correspondence with Mary Robinson, poet and spurned mistress of the Prince of Wales, I shall offer a more historically nuanced account of Coleridge's versions of

femininity.[8] I shall contend that he undermined (sometimes even as he set out) what Ross calls male Romanticism's strategy of presenting poetry as 'a form of masculine empowerment' and 'a paradigmatic form of manly action'.[9] Rather than blame Coleridge for a poetic 'cannibalisation' of the feminine, we need to see him as an unstable writer, who, at his best, opens gender roles and gendered poetics to question. Unsure of his own masculinity, in poetry as in life, Coleridge often leaves masculine and feminine, men and women, in undetermined relationships, their gender and sexual identities uncertain and fluid (Geraldine in 'Christabel' being an example of this). As Laura Claridge notes, 'the economies energising the majority of male Romantics' poems aimed at recuperating the special potency that accrues to marginalised forces, in this case, woman as that which is not always already written. Saying this is not the same as accusing the poets of appropriating such female voices'.[10]

'Kubla Khan'

'Kubla Khan' is Coleridge's most concentrated dramatisation of the conflicts, sexual and implicitly political, produced through the adoption of the gendered sublime and the beautiful. It features a male figure of power, the Khan, who is a sublime genius—a warrior, a statesman, a master-builder. It also features a poetic genius, sublime in his capacity to command awe, who also builds—builds domes in the air, or the imagination. Each of these figures is associated with a female: the Khan with the 'woman wailing for her demon lover', the poet with the Abyssinian maid, who sings rather than wails.[11]

Critics of the poem divide on the crucial question of whether the sublime Khan is analogous to, or contrasts with, the sublime poet, and whether the Abyssinian maid resembles, or differs from, the wailing woman.[12] If one accepts that Khan and poet, woman and maid are analogous, then the poem seems to suggest that the poet's vision seeks desperately to preserve, in transcendent form, the masculine creativity that has built the pleasure dome. For the Khan is like God in Genesis: he decrees and the dome is erected. His word has immediate and direct power in the world: it seems neither to require mediation nor the assistance of another. The Khan is a creator who needs neither a muse; nor a wife. But his creation is flawed: being a production of masculinity, and of a violent masculinity to boot, it is haunted by a dominance that issues in violent and libertine sexuality:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermittent burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail.
(PW, I, 297; ll. 14-21)

Shaped by a masculine sexuality to which women become victims, the Khan's dome is a place in which women's suffering and desire are heard as one in the sound of a 'savage' wail. But if the dome is characterised by violence, it is threatened by it too, for it is vulnerable to destruction, to 'ancestral voices prophesying war'.

The dome that the sublime poet proposes to build is not similarly vulnerable, for it exists only in the imagination. But it is not clear whether the poet can ever build it, for he doubts his own

creative power. He ends not with a successful construction, but with a vision of the awe he would inspire, the sublimity he would acquire, could he envision the dome in words. In a recent article Jane Moore has construed this outcome as a failure by the poet to attain the potency he desires. Reading the poet at the poem's end as being analogous to the Khan, she sees him as trying, but failing, to become a Khan himself, to become a sublime creator whose masculinity is produced through the domination of the feminine. She declares 'it is exactly at the moment when the poet fails to master woman that he fails also to be master of himself, of his own actions: the dome is never built and the poem, at least the poem the preface promises, is never finished.' For Moore, the poet cannot 'revive within me/ [the] symphony and song' of the Abyssinian maid (ll. 42-43) and therefore can neither master the feminine nor complete the poem.

Moore's argument is an intriguing one, for it highlights the extent to which sublimity, creativity, and masculinity are bound together in the poem, over and against visions of femininity. But in assuming that Khan and poet are simply analogous Moore overlooks some of the poem's distinctions in its portraits of women and of master-builders. The damsel with a dulcimer is to be distinguished from the 'woman wailing for her demon-lover!' (l. 16). She is from the start an apparition in a 'vision', and she is not subordinated to a masterful and evil lover. She does not wail, but sings and plays—signs of culture. She offers 'deep delight' with her lyric; she gives a gift of poetry. In other words, she is a muse, one who communicates the arts of an ancient culture to which a poet might aspire—especially as she unites words and music, like the minstrels and bards whom Coleridge idealised. She does not resemble, but differs from, the unidentified woman who wails for her demon lover, defined as that woman is by her bodily cry of desire/suffering. Coleridge, that is to say, sets up an opposition, not an analogy, making the poet and maid represent a cultured relationship, a communication of spirit through song, to contrast with the tyrannical and violent sexual relationship of the Khan's building.

The building which the Abyssinian maid's symphony and song sponsors is significantly different from the Khan's. Whereas Kubla tries to master nature by his decree, to shape it to his will, aping God and producing a dome vitiated by 'ancestral voices prophesying war' (l. 30), the poet's dome exists only as a possibility registered in the consciousness of writer and reader. The poet's dome of air, no more substantial than the breath of speech (or of the damsel's song) is a more beneficent creation than the Khan's, is an alternative to Kubla's mastery and to the subjugation it demands, precisely because it exists only in the other-world of fiction—a world in which the conditional has, through imagery, the visual intensity of the apparently real. By the end of the poem the dome can only be held together in suspension—not in a scene imagined which might exist beyond the poem but as a possibility of renewal held for as long as it takes to read the lines—a tentative half state in which to say 'I would build that dome in air' is to build it—a castle in the air of poetry.

The poet's dome, then, is dependent not on a Satanic master of women, but on the revival of their envisioned song in the self-conscious creativity of the male poet. The damsel with a dulcimer is a muse, a feminine song-within, without the acceptance of which the male poet's creation is vitiated by exclusivity and mastery as was the Khan's. The poet's remodelling of creative power, for Coleridge, is dependent upon his (for it is a he) willingness to be sponsored by the feminine, to incorporate (his ideas of) a woman's voice into his own: as he put it in a late notebook, 'in every true and manly Man there is a translucent Under-tint of the Woman'.^[13] It is, of course, the male poet who sets this agenda, forms this vision of the feminine, but it is one of revival, of sponsorship (in Coleridge's terms, reciprocity) not mastery in the sense that Moore suggests. Nor is it one of cannibalisation or enslavement: it is the male poet's failure to revive within himself the maid's song

that makes his building of the dome doubtful. It is the willingness to hear another's voice within, *but still to recognise it as another's voice*, that he seeks. The male poet does not absorb, or wish to absorb, the feminine; rather, he seeks to retain it as the other within the self. To do this is not to cannibalise or enslave, but neither is it to allow the female her own independent position: her voice remains hers, but it is valued for its ability to complete the male's creative masculinity. Coleridge does not reverse the process—value his masculinity in so far as it may complete the femininity of the maid (or any female poet). In 'Kubla Khan' Coleridge constructs a feminine voice in order to licence the masculine to create a poetry which both envisions and itself enacts a fragile and timeless harmony. In this sublime state poet, poetry and audience are united in rapture. They participate in a paradisaical sublime to contrast with the demonic and tyrannical sublime which the Khan's masculinity creates. Coleridge, in other words, had made a version of masculinity in opposition to the version, so powerful in eighteenth-century politics and poetics, that defined a man as a sublime conqueror of women. He had made the sublime man dependent on a feminine Muse, thus replacing mastery with sympathy, dominance with poetic chorus. In doing so, he offered himself—and his readers—a more inclusive masculinity, one attentive to and completed by a feminine voice. If, however, this voice is not absorbed, silenced, or conquered, it is registered in order that it may sponsor the semi-divine vision which the male poet builds. It is he who gains, via a more inclusive masculinity, a vision that seems to encompass both masculine and feminine, centre and circumference, reason and sensibility. It is because it can sponsor him, and lift him beyond the vitiating gender stereotype provided by the Khan, that the maid's voice is valued. Reviving her song allows the male poet a transcendent wholeness that she herself does not attain:

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

(ll. 50-54)

What the Abyssinian maid would think of this is not recorded.

If Coleridge's new man's sublime is not built on or vulnerable to violence, it is accessible only in renewed readings of the poem—or hearings of the maid's song. In the Preface he added later to the poem, Coleridge further qualified its already tentative conclusion. He argued that the poem was a 'psychological curiosity,' a fragment from 'a reverie' whose vision he could not consciously revive once the person from Porlock had interrupted him. Thus he placed limits on his poem's visionariness and on its revision of gender roles, denying it the status of poetry and removing from himself the power to consciously modify his own masculinity through poetic vision. The Preface, composed in Coleridge's more conservative years, blurs the poet's responsibility for what he has achieved. It implies that he provides no detailed model for the revision of masculinity and sublimity in society or self save by the example of the poem as a language of social and sexual harmony accessible only in dreams and drug-induced reveries. It is, apparently, only whilst half-asleep that Coleridge can discover a new sublime and a new manliness in which the feminine completes the masculine.

Coleridge and Mary Robinson: Feminising the Sublime

After 1798 inspiration by a feminine muse seemed, for a while, no dream. Coleridge found a poet prepared to act as his Abyssinian maid, willing to sponsor his bardic song with her own music. He found Mary Robinson, the former actress whose appearance as Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* had, in 1778, brought her to Prince George's attention. He had wooed her under the name Florizel, and turned the Shakespearian 'shepherdess' into his mistress. But he had later abandoned her, leaving her to the life of the kept mistress of a series of well-known public men, including Charles James Fox and Banastre Tarleton. Robinson had turned to poetry to support herself after being deserted by Tarleton.

Robinson's desertion by the Prince had led to a public scandal in 1781[14]; in 1796 George's desertion of his wife for another mistress reminded the public of what had formerly happened to Robinson. George's tyrannical treatment of women attracted widespread criticism, for it seemed to epitomise the aristocratic immorality which was thought to be undermining the constitution. Coleridge had himself published a poem critical of George's treatment of his wife, 'On A Late Connubial Rupture in High Life,' in which he hoped that George would mend his ways and act, as he was supposed to do, as protective husband and father: 'And ah! that Truth some holy spell might lend/ To lure thy Wanderer from the Syren's power' (*PW*, I, 152).

Robinson's sexual life became a political issue. To conservative supporters of the social order she was an emblem of female immodesty, an example of the dangers posed to Britain by radical change. Richard Polwhele attacked her along with Wollstonecraft as 'female Quixotes of the new philosophy'.[15] His phrase saw them as self-deluding knights, seduced by the romance of radical French ideas, when they should have been innocent damsels. Similarly, the *Annual Review* reminded women readers of her sexual past in order to deny her the power to speak for them; Robinson, it proclaimed, wielded a 'pen of vice':

Before a tender-hearted young lady has committed to memory the invocation to 'Apathy', or learned to recite with tragic emphasis the 'Ode to Ingratitude', let her at least be aware from *what reflections* the author wished to take shelter in insensibility, and for *what favours* her lovers had proved ungrateful.[16]

Opposition Whigs and radicals saw Robinson differently: to them she became a symbol of the injustice perpetuated by the aristocratic establishment which they were seeking to change. Her status as a victim of royal libertinism was cemented by the fact that she was, in fact, suffering from a paralysing disease. Coleridge pitied her for this, but also admired her writing. He did not seek to silence her authorial voice but promoted it in publications over which he had influence. He and she published poetic compliments to each other in the anti-ministerial newspaper *The Morning Post*, the paper which printed his political criticism of the government.

In the newspaper Coleridge presented their poetic relationship as one of mutual sympathy, in noticeable contrast to the sexual despotism Robinson had suffered as George's mistress. This gave gender relations a political context because sympathy for Robinson was implicitly a criticism of the Prince who had abandoned her, undermining his chivalric duty to protect. Coleridge placed his 'The Visions of the Maid of Orleans' immediately before Robinson's 'The Snow Drop' in the *Morning Post* of 26 December 1797. Taking advantage of the seasonal emphasis on peace and forgiveness, Robinson's poem used the flower as an image of herself as an abandoned, tender, crippled female:

All weak and wan, with head inclined,
Its parent breast, the drifted snow;
It trembles while the ruthless wind
Bends its slim form; the tempest lours,
Its em'rald eye drops crystal show'rs

On its cold bed below.[17]

Coleridge's 'Visions' (an extract from 'The Destiny of Nations') use similar maternal and sentimental imagery to portray Joan of Arc as a paragon of female virtue: Joan encounters a family frozen to death as they tried to escape the sacking of their village:

She meantime,
Saw crowded close beneath the couverture
A mother and her children—lifeless all,
Yet lovely! not a lineament was marred -
Death had put on so slumber-like a form!
It was a piteous sight! and one, a babe,
Lay on the woman's arm, its little hand
Smooth on her bosom. Wildly pale the maid
Gaz'd at the living wretch [18]

Coleridge's poem had a political purpose: by arousing sympathy for innocent French womanhood besieged by war it opposed the government's current war with revolutionary France. And preceding Robinson's poem, it contextualised her work in an implicitly political way as that of another innocent female who, like Joan, was sacrificed to the cruelty of the British aristocracy.

Robinson herself did not simply play upon her status as a suffering victim of libertinism. She also offered herself as a muse and respondent. In her 'To the Poet Coleridge' Robinson positioned herself as the sympathetic admirer of a poet already known for his radical opinions. She also positioned herself as a fellow lyricist, as a woman whose song responded to, but also inspired, Coleridge's words. Specifically, she associated herself with the Abyssinian maid of 'Kubla Khan':

I'll mark thy 'sunny dome', and view
Thy 'caves of ice', thy fields of dew!
Thy ever-blooming mead, whose flower
Waves to the cold breath of the moonlight hour![19]

Here Robinson offers herself as the delighted viewer of and believer in Coleridge's poetic landscape; her own verse appears as the offspring of his fertility, his 'ever-blooming mead'. Mutual sympathy replaces the sexual servitude Robinson had suffered (or was agreed to have suffered) at the hands of the libertine Prince. Coleridge's literary masculinity, Robinson suggests, is productive through sympathy, rather than dominant through sexuality. She shares the Abyssinian maid's song with Coleridge, and then gives him a song of her own inspired by it:

And now, with lofty tones inviting,
Thy Nymph, her dulcimer swift-smiting,
Shall wake me in ecstatic measures,
Far, far removed from mortal pleasures!
In cadence rich, in cadence strong,
Proving the wondrous witcheries of song!
I hear her voice! thy 'sunny dome',
Thy 'caves of ice,' aloud repeat,
Vibrations, maddening sweet!
Calling the visionary wanderer home.
She sings of thee, O! favoured child

Of minstrelsy sublimely wild!
Of thee, whose soul can feel the tone
Which gives to airy dreams *a magic all thy own!*
(ll. 59-72)

Reading Kubla Khan, she is inspired to write, rather than reduced to being the wailing victim of a demon lover.

If Robinson found her poetic field enriched by Coleridge's, Coleridge found in her—at least briefly—a lyric voice capable of modifying his own. He admired her for exactly that for which he praised the Abyssinian maid—her music. Recommending her 'Jasper' for inclusion in the *Annual Anthology*, he 'thought the metre stimulating'.^[20] He also praised 'the fascinating metre' of 'The Haunted Beach'. This latter poem was derivative of 'The Ancient Mariner' in subject matter but succeeded in intertwining lines of different metrical balance with an intricate and unusual rhyme-scheme:

The Spectre-band, his messmates brave
Sunk in the yawning ocean,
While to the mast he lash'd him fast
And brav'd the storm's commotion.
The winter moon, upon the sand
A silv'ry carpet made,
And mark'd the Sailor reach the land,
And mark'd his murd'rer wash his hand
Where the green billows play'd.^[21]

The last three lines of what Coleridge publicly called 'that absolutely original Stanza' suspend the expected resolution, protracting the verse by introducing a couplet which, conclusive though its rhyme might normally be, is itself superseded. Suspending the reader's expectations of narrative sequence was, of course, vital to Coleridge's own supernatural poetry, and in appreciating Robinson's music Coleridge was paying tribute to an ability which he understood to be more than merely technical. It was, he thought, through control of metre and rhyme that poetry could make readers suspend their disbelief in the supernatural.^[22] Prosody, Coleridge knew, could lull audiences into believing what they had thought to be impossible, thus making them doubt what they had assumed to be natural. And this process, of course, was potentially radical, since what had been assumed to be natural might include the established social and political order.

Robinson's control of music intrigued Coleridge with the possibility of modifying the understanding of gender on which the established order was dependent. It was through a lyrical revision of the sublime, made in reply to Robinson, that Coleridge again attempted, as he had in 'Kubla Khan', to undo the Burkean assumption that authority takes the form of a dominant masculinity. He did so in a poem called 'A Stranger Minstrel' (1800). This poem replied to Robinson's tributes to him. It alluded to her poem to his son Derwent, in which she imagines, via allusions to Coleridge's own verse, his son wandering through 'Romantic Mountains' with 'brows sublime'. It echoed Robinson's description of herself as a 'Stranger' and an 'untaught minstrel' in comparison with 'his loftier Muse'.^[23] In that poem Robinson had concluded with the hope that her poetic sublime would outlive the sublime mountains of his birthplace: 'Still may thy name survive, sweet Boy! till Time/ Shall bend to Keswick's vale—thy Skiddaw's brow sublimel' (ll. 101-2).

Coleridge's 'A Stranger Minstrel' takes up the questions Robinson had posed to the natural sublime. It too is set on Skiddaw. It too considers the role of the poet, even as it alludes to her poems

In that sweet mood of sad and humorous thought
 A form within me rose, within me wrought
 With such strong magic, that I cried aloud,
 'Thou ancient Skiddaw by thy helm of cloud,
 And by thy many-colour'd chasms deep,
 And by their shadows that for ever sleep,
 By yon small flaky mists that love to creep
 Along the edges of those spots of light,
 Those sunny islands on thy smooth green height,
 And by yon shepherds with their sheep,
 And dogs and boys, a gladsome crowd,
 That rush e'en now with clamour loud
 Sudden from forth thy topmost cloud,
 And by this laugh, and by this tear,
 I would, old Skiddaw, she were here!
 A lady of sweet song is she,
 Her soft blue eye was made for thee!
 O ancient Skiddaw, by this tear,
 I would, I would that she were here!
 Then ancient Skiddaw, stern and proud,
 In sullen majesty replying,
 Thus spake from out his helm of cloud
 (His voice was like an echo dying!):-
 'She dwells belike in scenes more fair,
 And scorns a mount so bleak and bare.'

(*PW*, I, 351, 9-33)

So far, so conventional: Skiddaw speaks through the Burkean sublime. But as he reads and quotes Robinson in the poem, Coleridge seems to challenge his own need to have his nature poetry confirmed as a protective and powerful masculine authority. The masculine Skiddaw ('His voice was like a monarch wooing') redefines his own sublimity in the words of Robinson's poetry:

Now to the 'haunted beach' can fly,
 Beside the threshold scourged with waves,
 Now where the maniac wildly raves,
 'Pale moon, thou spectre of the sky!'
 No wind that hurries o'er my height
 Can travel with so swift a flight.
 I too, methinks, might merit
 The presence of her spirit!
 To me too might belong
 The honour of her song and witching melody,
 Which most resembles me,
 Soft, various, and sublime,
 Exempt from wrongs of Time!

(55-67)

A strange shift has occurred, for although Skiddaw says that Robinson's song 'resembles me' it seems rather that he now resembles it in being 'soft, various and sublime' rather than 'stern and

proud' and sublime). The masculine majestic sublime has been modified from within by Robinson's words as, for the sake of the nation's moral health, Coleridge wished the Prince of Wales to have been. Here Coleridge was publicly providing an alternative version of masculine authority in which monarchical mountains and the male poet are presented as softened into feminine sensibility and yearning:

Thus spake the mighty Mount, and I
Made answer, with a deep-drawn sigh:-
'Thou ancient Skiddaw, by this tear,
I would, I would that she were here!
(68-71)

This conclusion is as near as Coleridge comes to a poetry in which a woman's verse and a feminine discourse reset his own. Here he is neither acting as fatherly protector, nor as a male poet bolstering his threatened mastery with the admiring verse of a subordinate poetess. He envisages not just a suspension of sublime power but a feminine colonisation of the traditionally masculine.

As was the case in 'Kubla Khan', Coleridge did not succeed in developing a way in which the visions conjured up in his poem could be translated into actions in the world beyond. That he did not succeed was due in part to his own fear of the radical unorthodoxy of the poetics he had sketched out. Susan Luther has written astutely of both his unorthodoxy and his fear. He was, she argues, groping towards a redefinition of the sublime in which authority would be based not on subordination but interchange, one that 'attempts to bring the lady's terms to his own'. Ultimately unsuccessful, it was flawed by Coleridge's desire simply to incorporate Robinson as woman and as poet in his own self-reflection. In Luther's words it displays 'the difference between the WOMAN and the MUSE as well as their unsettling similarity, the hazards encountered when the sublime of "SENSIBILITY!" and Fancy meets the sublime of . . . Imagination'.^[24]

After having written 'A Stranger Minstrel', Coleridge tended to retreat from its implicitly radical version of femininity. He reinscribed Robinson within a more conventional relationship, in which sublime authority was again gendered as masculine. In a letter of 1801, for example, he wished for Robinson the protection of a good husband and of his own poetry. And he quoted a letter of hers which suggests that she was ready to appeal to such chivalric values. The quotation suggests that Coleridge took refuge in the belief that Robinson simply confirmed him in the role of powerful man and sublime nature poet:

Poor dear Mrs Robinson! you have heard of her Death. She wrote me a most affecting, heart-rending Letter a few weeks before she died, to express what she called her death bed affection & esteem for me—the very last Lines of her Letter are indeed sublime -

'My little Cottage is retired and comfortable. There I mean to remain (if indeed I live so long) till Christmas. But it is not surrounded with the romantic Scenery of your chosen retreat: it is not, my dear Sir! the nursery of sublime Thoughts—the abode of Peace—the solitude of Nature's Wonders. O! Skiddaw!—I think, if I could but once contemplate thy Summit, I should never quit the Prospect it would present till my eyes were closed for ever!'

O Poole! that Woman had but been married to a noble Being, what a noble Being she herself would have been. Latterly, she felt this with a poignant anguish.—Well! -

O 'er her pil'd grave the gale of evening sighs;
And flowers will grow upon it's grassy Slope.
I wipe the dimming Water from mine eyes -
Ev'n in the cold Grave dwells the Cherub Hope!
(*CL*, II, 669)

Here Coleridge's lines of verse respond to Robinson's own idealisation of the mountain as an abode of peace and a 'nursery of sublime Thoughts'. They depict her death as a release of the kind she sought when her 'eyes were closed for ever'. Her grave becomes a nursery of the cherub hope; in the poetry of the man who himself dwelt under Skiddaw pity for her is able to release her from her thralldom to the sensible world of nature. Not Skiddaw, but the male poet who writes under its authority, becomes the locus of a sublime of translation from the sensible to the spiritual, from bondage to nature to hope of heaven. Coleridge, as the Lake District man and poet to whom Robinson appeals in her dying weakness, becomes, in his own eyes, the poetic husband who restores her lost nobility and respectability. It is his capacity for pity and grief ('the dimming Water') that allows her a possible future existence. Burkean subjection before natural power is transformed, through a feminine appeal to masculine pity and protectiveness, into a discourse which allows the woman a limited (but subordinate) position of freedom. Here though it is after death, and through the man's nature poetry, that the freedom is possible. Coleridge here falls short of his achievement in 'A Stranger Minstrel': he flatters rather than questions himself as he imagines himself in the conventional role of the strong male protector of the helpless female.

Coleridge continued to fight shy of the implications of his poem. In 1802 he rebuked Robinson's daughter for planning to publish in a collection of her mother's works a poem of his own alongside ones by Moore and 'Monk' Lewis, 'men, who have sold provocatives to vulgar Debauchees' (*CL*, II, 905). Idealising Robinson as a pure and dear Mother, 'of all names the most awful, the most venerable, next to that of God', Coleridge wished to save Robinson's posthumous reputation from the notoriety of the writers she had been associated with, to reinscribe her within the discourse of literary as well as personal propriety. But he also wished to save himself: faced with the prospect of publicly appearing as one of a company of libertine men who were associated with her, Coleridge was afraid. No longer able to see himself as her private literary protector, he panicked. He wished to avoid having his verse seem to be indebted to a poetic muse known for her loose morals and the bad company she kept.

Coleridge was neither disinterested nor feminist: he was trying to shape an authority-in-writing that he could himself adopt. He needed to be lord of his own utterance, to gain a position at the top, but through words that rejected the prevailing kinds of manliness. Robinson had inspired in Coleridge what his Abyssinian maid inspired in the idealised poet of 'Kubla Khan', a poetry which can escape the kind of masculinity set out by Burke and practised by the Prince, the kind predicated on its capacity to inspire awe and fear. As in 'Kubla Khan', however, Coleridge found difficulties in making this kind of poetic masculinity that on which he took his public stand. He remained unable and unwilling to risk staking his poetic character on a language of suspension and enchantment which flourished from positions that were culturally unconventional—from drug induced reverie, from the inspiration of a feminine sublime, from dialogue with a woman whom many regarded as notorious.

Luther sums up Coleridge's problems in doing justice to what Robinson had shown him as she had become a more challenging and creative muse than at first appeared:

If the problem for [the female lyricist] is how to recreate for herself the space of the beautiful within the sublime, or the sublime within the beautiful, how to claim her erotic and lyrical power without having to deny their contiguity so as to escape being once more (negatively) defined as her flesh, the problem for [the male lyricist] seems to be how to assimilate, accommodate, encompass and compose those moods, rhetorical modes and human impulses that his own and his culture's values deny him, unless he is willing to relinquish his position at the top.^[25]

Coleridge may have been unable wholly to relinquish his desire for a position at the top, yet his Romanticism should not as a consequence be seen as a consistent 'cannibalisation' and 'enslavement' of the female. If it often idealises a role for women that is at best supportive of and at worst subordinate to male creativity, if it often presents the feminine as merely a supplement to masculine power, it nevertheless also often calls women's subordination to those languages into question. Coleridge did sketch—but only sketch—an alternative model of poetic power through a feminising dialogue with a woman poet and muse. In doing so he revealed some of the limitations of the traditional (and interlinked) discourses of, or about, political and poetic power.

Notes

[1] Burke set out his gendered definition in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J.T. Boulton (London, 1958).

[2] See *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols (London, 1989), V, 45.. The argument is continued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), ed. Miriam Brody (London, 1985).

[3] Marlon B. Ross, 'Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetic Identity', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), pp. 26-51 (p. 34). See also Ross's *The Contours of Masculine Desire—Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York, 1988).

[4] See Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing and Sexual Difference* (Oxford, 1989).

[5] See Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London, 1993), pp. 20-27.

[6] In *Bearing The Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago and London, 1986), p. 40.

[7] I discuss these issues at greater length in my *Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, Hazlitt and De Quincey* (Basingstoke and New York, 1999).

[8] In this project I follow the subtle historicist work of Claudia L. Johnson in *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s. Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (Chicago and London, 1995), pp. 3-23. Also important for an approach of this kind are Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London, 1984), 18-35. See also Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790-1827* (Oxford, 1993).

[9] Marlon B. Ross, 'Romantic Quest...', p. 40. For a similar critique of Ross see Judith Page, *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1994), p. 36.

[10] *Romantic Potency: The Paradox of Desire* (Ithaca and London, 1992), p. 17. See also the introduction to Laura Claridge and Elisabeth Langland, *Out of Bounds. Male Writers and Gendered Criticism* (Amherst, Mass., 1990), pp. 4, 13.

[11] I take the text from *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2 vols (London, 1912), I, 295-98. Henceforth cited as PW.

[12] Contrasts are made by E. S. Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880* (Cambridge, 1975) p. 185 and Geoffrey Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid* (London, 1967) p. 142. Analogies are discoverable in John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi, 1987) pp. 219-20, as well as in Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, p. 20.

[13] S.T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, 5 vols (London and Princeton, N.J., 1980-), III, 906n.

[14] On Robinson's public notoriety and the political satire directed through ridicule of her towards the Prince, see Marguerite Steen, *The Lost One: a Biography of Mary (Perdita) Robinson* (London, 1937). Details of Robinson's life and loves were made available by her daughter in 1801 in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written By Herself* [2nd edn (London, 1930)].

[15] Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females, A Poem* (London, 1798), p. 6.

[16] Review of *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson*, in the *Annual Review for 1806*, 5 (1807), 516-17.

[17] For ease of reference I quote the text from Robinson's novel, where it is incorporated in order to present the author as a sentimental heroine: *Walsingham or, the Pupil of Nature*, 4 vols (London, 1797; facsimile rpt. New York and London, 1974), I, 53-54.

[18] The newspaper variants from the longer poem are recorded in David V. Erdman, 'Unrecorded Coleridge Variants', *Studies in Bibliography*, II (1958), 143-62 (p. 152) cf. PW, I, 138; 209-18.

[19] I take the text from *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838 An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Ashfield (Manchester and New York, 1995), pp. 131-32.

[20] *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols (London, 1956-71), I, 562. Henceforth cited as CL.

[21] I quote the seventh stanza, ll. 55-63, from the text included in *Lyrical Tales* (London, 1800; facsimile rpt. Oxford, 1989), pp. 72-77.

[22] Coleridge's theories about the preconditions for suspension of disbelief are explained in John Beer, *Coleridge's Poetic Intelligence* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), pp. 87-90.

[23] 'Ode Inscribed to the Infant Son of S. T. Coleridge, Esq.' lines 54, 68, in Ashfield (ed.), *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 133-34. In *The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson*, ed. M.E. Robinson, 3 vols (London, 1806).

[24] Susan Luther, 'A Stranger Minstrel: Coleridge's Mrs Robinson', *SiR*, 33 (1994), 391-409 (p. 407).

[25] Luther, 'A Stranger Minstrel . . .', p. 408.