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## Coleridge and the Theatre

Coleridge's career as a playwright has been obscured by a long-standing, now outdated, view about the nature of 'Romantic drama'. Writers from Joanna Baillie to William Wordsworth, scholars contended, were either ignorant of the stage or else rejected it.<sup>1</sup> Their reasons lay in the supposed corrupt taste of the times: theatres dominated by the gothic sensationalism of Matthew Lewis, the morally questionable plays of August von Kotzebue and the rising domestic melodrama. The only option, they maintained, was writing for the closet: what Byron called 'mental theatre'.<sup>2</sup>

Coleridge's literary career firmly contradicts such views. We often forget that the first half of the famous 'golden year' that produced *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) yielded not poetry but rather two plays: Coleridge's *Osorio* and Wordsworth's *The Borderers*. So hopeful were the authors that their tragedies would be produced that the Wordsworths travelled to London to lobby for their acceptance (*WL* 1, 195). It was only after receiving rejections that the two began to hatch various plans that would culminate in *Lyrical Ballads*. Had Richard Brinsley Sheridan at Drury Lane or Covent Garden's manager, Thomas Harris, accepted these early works, the history of Romanticism would look very different. Writing to a friend after the triumphant opening night of Coleridge's *Remorse* (1813), Robert Southey surmised that, had *Osorio* been accepted, 'the author might have produced a play as good every season: with my knowledge of Coleridge's habits, I verily believe that he would'.<sup>3</sup>

Even with this early rejection, Coleridge remained committed to the stage throughout his career. From *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794) to *Zapolya* (1818), he reworked not only traditional tragedy but also popular gothic drama and melodrama. His *Remorse* (1813) was the most successful new tragedy of the period. *Zapolya*, written at Byron's request for Drury Lane Theatre, though eventually rejected there, found a home at the Surrey Theatre, revised with Coleridge's blessing by Thomas John Dibdin as a melodrama. And while his reasons for writing plays were many, certainly much of the drama's attraction

lay in the theatre's elevated cultural status and significant financial rewards. A novel or collection of poems might fetch an established author between £50 and £200 at the turn of the nineteenth century, but a successful play could earn many times that sum. Reflecting on *Remorse's* success, Coleridge noted with satisfaction, 'It has been a good thing for the Theatre. They will get £8,000 or £10,000 by it, and I shall get more than all my literary labours put together, nay, thrice as much' (*CL* III, 437).

Like other Romantic playwrights, Coleridge had to overcome a series of cultural divisions arising from ingrained notions of 'high' and 'low'. Some of his best dramatic writing, in fact, traverses oppositions between 'high' dramatic tradition and 'low' theatrical tactics, uniting tragedy (fit for treating history and its men of high estate) and other popular genres (seen as suitable only for comedy and common domestic life). It also shows an acute awareness of the divided theatrical terrain of the age. Coleridge wrote at a time when the so-called 'patent' theatres – called such because the government granted them a monopoly on the performance of spoken drama – had to compete with the many 'illegitimate' or 'minor' houses, which had to traffic in new stage techniques and forms. In all of his plays he draws both on tragedy, from the Greeks to Shakespeare, and on the newest developments in the contemporary theatre. His hybrid dramas also reflect the struggles his characters face in working out the relations between private emotions and public actions.

This balancing act had Friedrich Schiller as its pivot. While by the late 1790s the German drama was largely identified with the works of Kotzebue and seen as salacious and possibly seditious, early British interest had centred on Schiller and other young German playwrights inspired by Shakespeare. Henry Mackenzie's groundbreaking 'Account of the German Theatre' (1788) had started the cultural trend, singling out Schiller's *The Robbers* as proof that German writers were emerging, thanks to English models, from the thrall of false French standards of taste. Given first as a public address and later published as an essay, Mackenzie's account found enthusiastic reception throughout Britain, and *The Robbers* was translated into English in 1792. Borrowing a copy in November 1794, Coleridge could not contain his excitement: 'My God, Southey, who is this Schiller, this convulser of the heart? Did he write his tragedy amid the yelling of fiends? [...] Why have we ever called Milton sublime?' (*CL* I, 122). Publishing his first volume of *Poems* (1796) two years later, he included a sonnet lavishly praising Schiller as a 'Bard tremendous in sublimity'. His note to the poem goes even further:

A Winter midnight – the wind high – and 'The Robbers' for the first time! –  
The readers of SCHILLER will conceive what I felt. SCHILLER introduces no  
supernatural beings; yet his human beings agitate and astonish more than all  
the *goblin* rout – even of Shakespeare. (CPW II, i, 72–73)

Coleridge's sonnet and note show him positioning himself in relation to the most popular English literary mode of the 1790s, the gothic, whose fondness for depicting supernatural scenes of horror and terror was especially reviled by late eighteenth-century reviewers.<sup>4</sup> What renders Schiller superior to other writers, even Shakespeare and Milton, is his ability to 'agitate and astonish' readers without introducing the supernatural. Instead, his 'human beings' produce this feeling of sublime encounter by containing the infinite and impossible within themselves. The best dramatic writing, Coleridge suggests, is that which moves audiences without recourse to spirits or stage tricks, producing the effect of the supernatural by tapping the seemingly unknowable depths of the soul.

Writing two decades later, in Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge revisited these issues in his account of the writing of *Lyrical Ballads*. In planning that volume, he recounts, he and Wordsworth chose to divide their labour via this same question of the supernatural:

[M]y endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic [...] Mr. Wordsworth on the other hand was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural. (BL II, 6–7)

In this clean designation of roles, Wordsworth was to awaken readers to 'the wonders of the world before us', while he himself would infuse his supernatural poems with 'a human interest' to procure 'that willing suspension of disbelief [...] which constitutes poetic faith' (BL II, 7). Readers examining Coleridge's two most significant contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* project, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere' (1798) and 'Christabel' (intended for but not published in 1800), however, will find muddier waters. Each presents scenes exuberantly supernatural, such as the Spectre Ship of the 'Rime' or the visitation of Christabel's ghostly Mother as she and Geraldine prepare for bed. Yet both also cultivate haunting effects from nature and the everyday, whether a sight of sea-snakes swimming in ocean waters (which triggers the Mariner's redemption) or a guard dog howling at an April moon half-hidden by clouds (the scene of Christabel's night adventures). In his own poems, then, Coleridge consistently plays both sides of this supernatural–natural divide, and another passage from the *Biographia* potentially captures why. '[T]he excellence aimed at' in the supernatural poetry, he explains, 'was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of the emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations' (BL II, 6). Here, the phrase 'dramatic truth' is especially telling. It shows Coleridge not only insisting on psychological realism regardless of supernatural subject matter, but also locating that sense of 'truth' – even in poetry – in a 'dramatic' medium.

Coleridge's admiration for Schiller as a dramatist of truth in emotion was lifelong rather than a passing fancy. His esteem led him, after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, to undertake a monumental translation of the second two parts of Schiller's seminal *Wallenstein* trilogy, which he published in 1800. Throughout his career, Coleridge would return not just to Schiller's sublimity but also to his depictions of inner emotion and external action in conflict. Among his many excellences, Schiller embodied for Coleridge above all things a way of imagining how a *modern* tragic drama – one retaining Shakespeare's virtues while eschewing his 'goblin rout' – could be imagined for the Romantic stage.

We can already see this balancing of old and new, public and private, in *The Fall of Robespierre, an Historic Drama* (1794). Written with Robert Southey in Bristol while the two were hatching plans to form a communal 'Pantisocracy' in Pennsylvania, the play offers a compressed account of the events of 8 and 9 Thermidor (26 and 27 July), when Bertrand Barère (Barrere in the play) joined allies of the already executed Danton to condemn Robespierre for seeking a dictatorship. After a brief escape, Robespierre was seized on 27 July 1794 and summarily guillotined. News of the events reached London on 16 August, and Southey later indicated to Henry Nelson Coleridge that his part was 'written with newspapers before me, as fast as newspaper could be put into blank verse'.<sup>5</sup> Coleridge and Southey were not alone in finding Robespierre's death suitable for tragedy. As Matthew Buckley notes, newspapers including *The Times* drew on Shakespearean prototypes to describe the rapidly changing situation.<sup>6</sup> Such reports even shaped Coleridge's Shakespeare-influenced first act, which opens not by putting public events into blank verse, but rather by imagining the private motives behind them, the kind of internal emotional struggles he admired in Schiller.

The play begins with Barrere in private contemplation of Robespierre's motivations:

I fear the Tyrant's *soul* –  
 Sudden in action, fertile in resource,  
 And rising awful 'mid impending ruins;  
 In splendor gloomy, as the midnight meteor,  
 That fearless thwarts the elemental war.  
 When last in secret conference we met,  
 He scowl'd upon me with suspicious rage,  
 Making his eye the inmate of my bosom.  
 I know he scorns me – and I feel, I hate him –  
 Yet there is in him that which makes me tremble! [*Exit.*]

(I, 3–12)<sup>7</sup>

Barrere may refer in passing to the stormy external world of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence, but ultimately he seeks insight into the ‘Tyrant’s *soul*’, that elusive entity discernible only in unguarded moments of ‘secret conference’. Differences of political principle may provide public justification for Barrere’s opposition, but it is personal animosity (‘I feel, I hate him’) that motivates him. The scene even re-inscribes this internalization as the Thermidorians Tallien and Legendre in turn examine Barrere to find ‘Th’imprison’d secret struggling in the face’ (1, 21).

This embrace of the private is most pronounced in the second scene, centred on the one character Coleridge invented: Tallien’s mistress Adelaide. Adelaide laments the losses she sees attending political change – ‘this new freedom! at how dear a price / We’ve bought the seeming good! The peaceful virtues / [...] / All sacrificed to liberty’s wild riot’ (1, 198–99, 202) – and then sings to Tallien of domestic pleasures:

Tell me, on what holy ground  
 May domestic peace be found?  
 Halcyon daughter of the skies,  
 Far on fearful wing she flies,  
 From the pomp of scepter’d state,  
 From the rebel’s noisy hate.

In a cottag’d vale she dwells  
 List’ning to the Sabbath bells! (1, 210–25)

Adelaide’s song invites us to leave behind both the monarchy’s ‘scepter’d state’ and the ‘rebel’s noisy hate’ to find solace in a rural spot. There, one might find an untainted point of view from which political criticism can still be made. As a literary device in British poetry, the figure of the rural retreat from worldly strife goes back through William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785) to, at least, Anne Finch’s ‘Nocturnal Reverie’ (1713). Coleridge would return to it repeatedly in the poems of the 1790s: sometimes as a literal spot (his rural cottage in ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’), sometimes as a purely imaginative refuge (as with the frost and the fire-grate in ‘Frost at Midnight’) and sometimes a combination of both (as with ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’). That such a retreat from the world of politics might also enable political critique of a cooler sort is most apparent in his ‘Fears in Solitude’, where Coleridge first places himself in a quiet nook and from that place of seclusion calls on his countrymen to reflect on their own warlike nature.

No such retreat is available in *The Fall of Robespierre* as Tallien effectively dismisses Adelaide’s plea, dragging her back into the world of political strife by reminding her that her brother has been executed by the Revolution.

All thought of a separate peace, he argues, must give way to ‘vengeance on these patriot murderers’ (I, 237). Other conspirators (including Barrere) then enter, and any hope of private respite is swept aside by calls to public duty. Accompanied by cries from the street of ‘No Tyrant! Down with the Tyrant!’ (I, 271), they rush off to the Convention, Tallien swearing by ‘the holy poniard, that stabbed Caesar’ that he will kill Robespierre.

While his opponents seek an inner self behind public masks, Robespierre, the ‘Incorruptible’, believes there should be no gap between words and inner thought. Where others seek secret meanings, he lives entirely in public language as a supposedly unmediated image of his inner life. This is why he can be quickly defeated once his opponents publicly label him ‘tyrant’. With Robespierre’s public speech silenced by the Convention, there is nothing left: no secret self to fall back on when his public voice is stilled. Significantly, he does not appear at all in the final act, as his fate is sealed. His death is not Tallien’s promised private stabbing but a juridical murder. The journalistic nature of Southey’s second and third acts reinforce this erasure of the private, as the private lives evoked in Coleridge’s first act are overwhelmed by public events.

*The Fall of Robespierre* already stages the struggle between public life and private retirement that would play out in different ways not just in *Osorio/Remorse* and *Zapolya* but also in ‘Ode to the Departing Year’, ‘Fears in Solitude’ and ‘France: An Ode’. The play also confirms Coleridge and Southey’s awareness of the contemporary stage, since they were not the only dramatists responding to contemporary events. Since news of the storming of the Bastille first reached Britain in July 1789, London theatres had seized on events in France as fodder for new plays: Robert Merry and Charles Bonner’s pantomime *The Picture of Paris* (1790) epitomizes this trend. By the summer of 1794, there already existed several dramatic representations of Robespierre as a villain, including John Bartholomew’s *Fall of the French Monarchy; or, Louis XVI* (1794) and Edmund John Eyre’s *Maid of Normandy; or, The Death of the Queen of France* (1794).<sup>8</sup> Composed in their wake, *The Fall of Robespierre* shares a number of features with these plays, chronicling events in Paris while pointedly asking whether revolutionary liberty might mask darker urges towards violence and libertinism. Coleridge and Southey’s play thus stands at the end of an interesting but short tradition of revolutionary docu-dramas.

For by the time Coleridge came to draft *Osorio* in 1797, the situation at home in an England at war had deteriorated – particularly for British writers sympathetic to revolutionary principles. The autumn of 1794 saw William Pitt’s government crackdown on radical activity, placing several members of the London Corresponding Society on trial for treason

and suspending habeas corpus. The government's Licensor of Plays, John Larpent, began to block stage productions referring to events in Paris, silently expressing the fear that an audience hearing the radical speeches of a figure like Robespierre – even when presented as a villainous tyrant – might be spurred to radical action. With the possibility of staging a play on current events effectively barred, radical-leaning writers like Southey and Coleridge turned to historical subjects to explore their ideas. Southey responded with *Joan of Arc* (1796), an epic poem set in fifteenth-century France to which Coleridge contributed several passages. And in the following year, Coleridge began work on *Osorio*, a tragedy set in sixteenth-century Spain. Like *Joan of Arc*, *Osorio* takes place against a backdrop of war and religious oppression, the forces of the Inquisition acting as agents of repression in ways that would have resonated with audiences familiar with government tyranny at home.

In *Osorio*, Coleridge pits a Schillerian analysis of internal emotion against the popular sensationalist drama; at the same time, he self-consciously wields sensational tactics while critiquing them. With increasing competition from the so-called 'minor' houses – which, legally barred from performing 'legitimate', spoken drama, were inventing new kinds of theatre – the patent theatres at Drury Lane and Covent Garden had to turn to music and sensational action to please changing audiences. We can see these forces at work most vividly in the play that Sheridan chose to stage in the same month that he rejected *Osorio*: Matthew Lewis's *The Castle Spectre* (1797). *Osorio* shares many traits with Lewis's play, which features a riveting ghost scene, thrilling escapes and a gripping musical score composed by Michael Kelly. Both place situations of distress and daring before their audiences, and both deal in the slow accumulation of tension punctuated by involuntary displays of emotion. But while Lewis focuses on thrilling his audience through plot twists – treating them to a roller-coaster ride of sensational feeling – Coleridge instead foregrounds how memory and powerful emotion impact character action. Lewis haunts from without, Coleridge from within.

*Osorio* thus opens not with the event that most fundamentally shapes its story – Osorio's attempt to have his older brother Albert assassinated and his subsequent disappearance – but with its aftermath three years later. His brother presumed dead, the villainous Osorio continues to press Maria, Albert's fiancée, to accept his death and to marry him. In this he is supported by his ageing father, Velez, who urges her in the play's opening scene to 'Not make the living wretched for the dead' (1, ii, 3). Albert, meanwhile, has returned home to Granada disguised as a Moor, determined not to reveal himself until he can probe his brother's conscience and determine whether Maria has kept her vows to him.



Centred on the machinations of one brother to displace his sibling and claim his betrothed, *Osorio* strongly recalls Schiller's *The Robbers* in its backstory and characterization. Like Albert, Schiller's Karl Moor returns disguised to a home where his brother now rules; like Albert, he uses his disguise to ascertain whether his fiancée Amalia still loves him. However, Coleridge is interested less in bold actions than in pursuing Schiller's exploration of the self by dramatizing his characters' emotions when placed under stress. Thus Albert, on seeing Maria for the first time – in conference with a Moresco woman, Alhadra, who has come to plead on behalf of her imprisoned husband, Ferdinand – *'sinks down, & hides his face in his garment'* (I, i, 265). Overcome by her presence, he is unable to act in the face of his own bewildered emotions. For, while her voice convinces him that 'She is no Traitor' (I, i, 274), her not appearing in mourning for him makes him believe that she has married Osorio. Rather than propelling the action, intense emotion, if anything, stymies action by shutting people down. Act I closes in stalemate: with Maria sworn to remain faithful to Albert against Osorio's urgings; with Albert refusing to come forward until he has fully tested Maria's love and Osorio's capacity to atone for his previous sins; and with Osorio believing his brother dead and determined to win Maria at any cost.

Such emotionally complex situations become a staple of the play as it progresses. Act II begins with Osorio attempting to employ his previous co-conspirator, Ferdinand, to conduct a mock-seance to trick Maria into believing Albert to be dead. Having previously employed Ferdinand to assassinate Albert, Osorio expects him to have no scruples over 'play[ing] the Sorcerer' (II, i, 28). What he does not bank on is Ferdinand's duplicity and moral conscience: that, years earlier, he was moved to spare Albert's life on learning his identity. What emerges is a scene with little action but replete with tension, underwritten by each character's distrust of the other. Wishing not to be Osorio's unwitting tool a second time, Ferdinand voices concern that he will be recognized, persuading Osorio instead to approach a 'Stranger' (II, i, 27) new to the neighbourhood who claims to be able to 'bring the dead to life again' (II, i, 40). This 'Wizard' (II, i, 134) is, of course, the recently arrived Albert in disguise. In one of Coleridge's most highly wrought scenes, a disguised Albert finds himself not just negotiating with the brother who arranged his attempted murder but also agreeing to stage a mock-religious ritual to convince his love that he is dead:

ALBERT.                    Declare your business!  
 OSORIO. I love a Lady, and she would love me,  
           But for an idle and fantastic scruple.

...



- In truth, this Lady lov'd another Man,  
 But he has perish'd –
- ALBERT.                      What? you kill'd him? hey?
- OSORIO. I'll dash thee to the Earth, if thou but think'st it.  
 Thou Slave, thou Galley-slave! thou Mountebank!  
 I leave thee to the Hangman!
- ALBERT.                      Fare you well!  
 I pity you, Osorio! even to anguish!  
 (*Albert retires off the stage*)
- OSORIO (*recovering himself*). 'Twas ideotcy! I'll tie myself to an Aspen  
 And wear a Fool's Cap. – Ho! (*calling after Albert*)
- ALBERT. (*returning*) ... I listen to you.
- OSORIO.                      In a sudden tempest  
 Did Albert perish – he, I mean, the Lover –  
 The fellow –
- ALBERT.     Nay, speak out, 'twill ease your heart  
 To call him Villain! – why stand'st thou aghast?  
 Men think it natural to hate their rivals!
- OSORIO (*hesitating and half doubting whether he should proceed*).  
 Now till she knows him dead, she will not wed me!
- ALBERT (*with eager vehemence*).  
 Are you not wedded then? merciful God!  
 Not wedded to Maria? –
- OSORIO.                      Why, what ails thee?  
 Art mad or drunk? why look'st thou upward so?  
 Dost pray to Lucifer, prince of the Air?
- ALBERT. Proceed. I shall be silent.  
 (*Albert sits, and leaning on the Table hides his face*)   (II, ii, 83–85, 91–98, 101–12)

This passage exemplifies *Osorio's* rapid exchanges of intense feeling: a scene almost embarrassingly bare of incident nevertheless crackles with the electricity of a duel. Where a similar scene in *The Castle Spectre* would produce swashbuckling action, as when the hero leaps from a window into the arms of rescuers, here little is resolved and much felt. Concealed by his disguise, Albert tries to probe his guilty brother's conscience without being discovered. Yet the life-and-death nature of the encounter renders him perpetually vulnerable to emotional turmoil as Osorio reveals his own treachery and Maria's fidelity.

Acts III and IV intensify this regimen of sparse action and deep play. With Velez, Osorio and Maria assembled in a '*Hall of Armory with an altar*' (III, i), the disguised Albert conducts his seance, featuring sensational lighting effects and accompanied by strange music and a chorus. He has been instructed by Osorio to have the ritual yield a token from Albert's spirit: in

this case, a picture that Maria gave to Albert years earlier, but that Osorio has since procured secretly. Wishing to sting his brother into remorse and repentance, Albert covertly substitutes a picture of his own attempted assassination. Each character's response to the appearance of this new image on the altar foregrounds the complexities at play. The sceptical Maria, suspecting 'some trick' (III, i, 12) yet acknowledging the power of 'Fancy' and 'bodily creepings' to 'give substance to the shadow' (III, i, 113–14), swoons at the appearance of the conjured picture. Assuming it to be the one she gave Albert, she faints without taking in its details. In spite of having commissioned the entire scene, Osorio is thrown '*in a state of stupor*' (III, i, 118) as the picture appears, and in his absence of mind also fails to take in its actual content. Velez in many ways acts the most ambiguously: snatching up the picture and hiding it in his robes, he momentarily exits the scene with Osorio to prevent Maria examining it when she regains consciousness. Apparently, he is so bent on duping her into marriage with his son that he, too, is unable to interpret the image.

Albert's substitution of one picture for another thus produces none of the effects on his audience that he intended. In each case, their anxieties and predispositions prevent them from seeing what is before their eyes. The situation is further compounded by the disguised Albert's unwillingness to act boldly. As Velez and Osorio exit, he finds himself alone with a disorientated Maria, yet fails to disclose his identity. Instead, he merely informs her that Albert 'was not murder'd' (III, i, 136) and urges her to meet him the next day. The scene dramatizes a great deal of emotional reaction, but these responses do not lead to immediate action, as Coleridge debunks the power of spectacle to determine, or even mould, behaviour. The characters instead remain true to their predilections and experiences, so much so that their emotional states literally obstruct their vision. While in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) Wordsworth would criticize the Ancient Mariner as someone who 'does not act but is continually acted upon' (*LB* 791), *Osorio* demonstrates the degree to which questions of passivity, emotional stasis and incapacity are central to understanding the poetry and plays of the 1790s. We can further trace the influence of poems like the 'Rime', 'Christabel' and 'Love' most immediately in longer poetic romances such as Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) and *Marmion* (1808), but it extends well into the nineteenth century: from the poetry of John Keats (both 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame sans Merci') to that of Alfred Tennyson, whose 'Lady of Shalott' dramatizes a heroine in stasis spurred into acting on her desire.

*Osorio*'s drama of emotional stasis only moves forward after its central incantation scene, and then only when Velez congratulates his son on

his stratagem, especially the picture of the assassination. At this point, Osorio finally perceives that he has been duped by Ferdinand, to whom he had provided the original picture to give to the disguised Albert for the ritual. Vowing revenge, he arranges for Albert's imprisonment by the Inquisition and plans to confront Ferdinand alone in some nearby caves. Even in this climate of renewed action, however, emotional responses still predominate – as when Albert, trying to convert Osorio, is ‘*almost overcome by his feelings*’ (v, ii, 101) – until we get to the climax to the play, which gave Coleridge considerable difficulties when he came to revise *Osorio* for the stage.

Writing on the transformation of *Osorio* into *Remorse*, J. C. C. Mays concludes that Coleridge made few revisions to his play before late spring of 1812 (CPW III, ii, 1028), when two developments probably turned him back to it. The first was his entering into negotiations, first with the Haymarket and then with Drury Lane, to produce his tragedy for the stage. The second was the publication of volume III of Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions* (1812), a series of dramas Coleridge admired. In the introduction to that volume, Baillie had written, ‘Of all our passions, Remorse and Jealousy appear to me to be the best fitted for representation’.<sup>9</sup> We cannot know for certain whether this comment served to spur Coleridge to revision. What we do know is that Coleridge changed the title of his play to *Remorse* at this time, as if to announce its allegiance with Baillie's works.<sup>10</sup>

*Remorse* had its premiere at Drury Lane Theatre on 25 January 1813. It played for twenty nights: the longest run of a tragedy in the still young nineteenth century. Staged during the Peninsular Wars, it appeared at a time profoundly different from that in which *Osorio* was first conceived. As John David Moore and Julie Carlson have shown, audiences interpreted Coleridge's villain not as an embodiment of 1790s Pittite repression, but rather as a commentary on Napoleon.<sup>11</sup> His play having acquired a different political valence, Coleridge rewrote significant portions to improve its stageability. These revisions, some made on the advice of the theatre, included renamed characters, significant cuts, an altered ending and a new opening scene to establish the background to the play. While Coleridge complained of the expositional scene as ‘Prologue play[ing] Dialogue with Dumby’, he did agree to the changes requested.<sup>12</sup>

Among its many clarifications, *Remorse* strengthens its characterization of Alvar (renamed from Albert) as a freethinker on religious matters. Retaining the lines from *Osorio* that Teresa (renamed from Maria) ‘hath no faith in Holy Church [...] / Her lover school'd her in some newer nonsense (II, i, 34–35), *Remorse* adds that in the battle for the Belgic states Alvar has fought on the ‘better cause’ (I, i, 169) against his Catholic homeland.

This detail strengthens our sense of his religious nonconformity by attaching it to political action. Thus, while Ordonio (renamed from Orsorio) repeatedly proclaims his intellectual independence from moral checks and social bonds, Alvar is presented by Coleridge as a competing model of liberation, but one who is reassuringly Protestant, carefully principled and selflessly conscientious. It is easy to see how, presented with this contrast, British audiences aligned the hero of *Remorse* with their own cause and its villain with that of Napoleon.

Most suggestive of all of Coleridge's revisions, however, are those attending Alhadra's final speech, which had closed *Osorio*:

I thank thee Heaven! thou hast ordain'd it wisely,  
That still extremes bring their own cure. That point  
In misery, which makes the oppressed Man  
Regardless of his own life, makes him too,  
Lord of the Oppressor's — Knew I an hundred Men  
Despairing, but not palsied by despair,  
This arm should shake the Kingdoms of the World;  
The deep foundations of iniquity  
Should sink away, Earth groaning from beneath them;  
The strong-holds of the cruel Men should fall,  
Their Temples and their mountainous Towers should fall;  
Till desolation seem'd a beautiful thing,  
And all that were and had the Spirit of Life,  
Sang a new song to him who had gone forth,  
Conquering and still to conquer! (v, i, 201–15)

In the speech from *Osorio*, the emotion of despair – if one isn't 'palsied' by the strength of the emotion – can lead to revolt. Finally locating a feeling that can spur deeds, Coleridge in *Osorio* seems to grant the last word to the proponent of revolutionary emotion. Here we encounter, rather than inward remorse, outward revenge. As with *The Fall of Robespierre*, the play moves outward from private emotion to public action.

In the revised *Remorse*, the ultimate status of Alhadra's speech is far more elusive, and depends on which version of the play one encounters. For, although approved by the government's Licensor of Plays, the speech was excised in performance. Whether this decision was made by Coleridge or Drury Lane's management is unclear, but it is part of a larger pattern of radical revision to the play's final scene. In the stage version of the play, '*The doors of the dungeon are broken open, and in rush ALHADRA, and the band of Morescoes*' (v, i, 182); Ordonio, accused of Ferdinand's murder, confesses and dies at the hands of Alhadra, who is then hurried off the stage by the Morescoes. This means that the version of *Remorse* seen

by audiences ends not with Alhadra's call to 'shake the Kingdoms of the World' but rather with a closing speech by Alvar, who describes how 'Just Heaven instructs us' through our 'inward Monitress' of 'Conscience' and, where conscience fails, remorse (v, i, 215–17). In the stage version, remorse trumps revenge and morality cordons off revolt. This melodramatic resolution – where domesticity provides a check against rebellious emotions – defeats any tragic turn.

Coleridge restored Alhadra's speech when he published the text of *Remorse* in February of 1813. In its printed form, *Remorse* offers a more ambivalent political vision, where Alhadra's vision of a transformed world remains in unresolved tension with Alvar's embrace of more traditional values. His claims to be able to tame passion within marriage and violent feelings within the moral structure of atonement stand uneasily next to his brother's fate. This mixed ending extends to its handling of genre, where Alvar and Teresa kneel to receive Valdez's blessing as in a comic denouement, but must do so with Ordonio's corpse lying nearby: a joining of comedy and tragedy that would become an often criticized feature of stage melodrama.

Coleridge would turn again to issues of tradition and innovation, domesticity and revolt, in his final play, *Zapolya: A Christmas Tale, in Two Parts*. Like *Remorse*, *Zapolya* loudly proclaims its canonical ties: to Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* (to justify the significant gap in time between the two parts) and to Aeschylus (as a source of its two-part structure of prelude and play). Such links have allowed later commentators to align *Zapolya* with dramatic tradition against newer models. In opposition to this portrait, however, are two competing factors. First, Coleridge chose to invoke Schiller, the great exemplar of contemporary historical tragedy, by borrowing the villain's name, Pestalutz, from Schiller's *Death of Wallenstein* (CPW III, ii, 1334). Second, he allowed *Zapolya* to be performed in revised form at a so-called minor theatre, the Surrey, as a melodrama. The combination suggests that Coleridge, always a champion of Shakespeare and canonical tragedy, also cared deeply about the stageability of his plays, believing that dramatic tradition could be placed in fruitful dialogue with new forms.

*Zapolya* tackles history in a layered way. While presenting itself as a dramatization of a remote episode of Hungarian history, its two parts – 'The Usurper's Fortune' and 'The Usurper's Fate' – suggest a more general exploration of politics and governance. This allegorical tendency is confirmed by its patterns of allusion. The play's setting of 'Illyria', for example, may just be another Shakespearean nod – this time to *Twelfth Night* – but it also is the name that Napoleon chose to create an imperial province in

the Balkans. As with *Osorio* and *Remorse*, Coleridge's choice of a remote setting offers him the opportunity to inscribe into his play an allegory of the French Revolution and the subsequent rise of Napoleon. Rent by military usurpation and internal conflict, Coleridge's Illyria looks a lot like Robespierre's France.

The first part or prelude to *Zapolya*, not unlike the part of Schiller's trilogy Coleridge did not translate, *Wallenstein's Camp*, begins with a great deal of military bustle and hints of various plots. Emerick, a fairly stock villain, connives in the death of Andreas, the lawful king, and in a slander against the queen that her son is a bastard. With the exception of the heroic Raab Kiuprili, he has united the military behind him; even Kiuprili's son Casimir sides with him against his father. Like Claudius from *Hamlet*, Emerick hopes that Zapolya will 'Offer[s] at once the royal bed and throne!' (I, i, 401); like Coleridge's own Ordonio, he occupies the roles of murderer, usurper and would-be seducer. As an illegitimate ruler who forces out the true royal family, he would also have appeared to audiences as yet another stage Napoleon. The prelude ends with Emerick moving to seize power, but Kiuprili manages to escape the pretender's clutches and to rescue the pregnant queen. He is aided by Chef Ragozzi, who perishes in a civil war that follows, leaving an orphaned daughter, 'one of numberless / Planks from the same vast wreck' (II, i, 149–50) of Illyria taken over by a usurping villain.

While there is a dynastic struggle here and references, for example, to chieftains assembling at Temeswar, a one-time informal regional capital, *Zapolya* is not, like *The Fall of Robespierre*, so much 'An Historic Drama' as a romance of hidden identities and predestined lovers. Rather than picking up where its prelude left off, the play's second part opens twenty years later to allow various characters to grow into adulthood. Act I opens with Sarolta, the wise and virtuous wife of Casimir, discussing life at court with her attendant Glycine and echoing *The Fall of Robespierre's* Adelaide in praising a quiet life in the country. Glycine has been betrothed to one of Casimir's lackeys, the villainous and cowardly Laska, but Sarolta already senses of Glycine that 'Something above thy rank there hangs about thee' (I, i, 65). Her premonition proves accurate: we learn that Glycine is not only the daughter of the deceased Chef Ragozzi but also beloved by a peasant boy, Bethlen, whose lowly upbringing during the civil war also conceals his noble heritage as Prince Andreas, the son of Queen Zapolya and true heir to the throne. Zapolya herself is revealed to be still alive in the second scene, but she and Kiuprili have had to remain hidden in a cave, wearing '*rude and savage garments*' (stage direction, II, i). Emerick, meanwhile, has proven himself to be a truly despicable ruler.

Publicly a tyrant and privately a libertine, he lusts after his supporter Casimir's wife, Sarolta, and plans to murder him and rape her.

Coleridge called this second part of *Zapolya* 'The Usurper's Fate', matching the prelude's 'The Usurper's Fortune'; but it is also labelled before Act 1 as 'Usurpation Ended; or, She Comes Again'. While the subtitles on the title page suggest the overarching orders of fate and fortune, the additional subtitle suggests more agency on the character's parts in ending the usurpation, with 'she' potentially referring to any of the three main women in the second part. Most obviously, Zapolya 'comes again', surviving to proclaim her son the rightful king, but Glycine and Sarolta also intervene at key moments. The warrior's daughter, Glycine, saves Bethlen/Andreas from the treachery of Emerick and Laska. Sarolta, meanwhile, defies Emerick, leads Casimir back to virtue and welcomes the restored royal family to her home at the play's close. With Emerick unmasked and the true identities of Glycine and Bethlen revealed, the 'assembled chieftains' of Illyria announce that they 'have deposed the tyrant' (IV, iii, 6) and unite Andreas and Glycine as king and queen. All the dangers of tyranny and the usurpation of power are resolved through the disguises and love plots of romance, managed here by the female characters.

The other feature Coleridge takes from romance or fairy tale involves the legend of the war-wolf or, to use the familiar term, werewolf: Glycine reveals that everyone believes the local forest to be the den of werewolves, vampires and other monsters (I, i, 337). In fact, Kiuprili, in his 'savage garments', has pretended to be a war-wolf to keep anyone from discovering that he and Zapolya have been hiding in a cave for twenty years. This ruse provides for much of the plot, with, for example, the lackey Laska claiming to have killed the war-wolf. Of course, the term 'war-wolf' also probably evoked the decades of war that had finally ended at Waterloo in 1815, the time when Coleridge commenced work on *Zapolya* (CPW, III, ii, 1329): here again Coleridge uses a play to think through the era of Napoleonic usurpation.<sup>13</sup>

Not offering actual Hungarian history, *Zapolya* appears more a meditation on the issues of the revolutionary Napoleonic era. In this, it joins *The Fall of Robespierre* and *Remorse* in its turn against the Terror and Napoleonic strongmen. William Hazlitt confirms this political valence when, in attacking the Lake Poets in the *Yellow Dwarf*, he links a speech by Kiuprili ('Prelude', I, 351–72) to a pro-monarchist speech given in the 'French House of Commons' (Howe xix, 202). Placing Kiuprili on the one side and Emerick and Casimir on the other, the prelude effectively restages the 1790s' pamphlet wars over the revolution led by Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. The would-be king rehearses Paine's assault on inherited authority and tradition:



Is it conscience,  
 That a free nation should be handed down,  
 Like the dull clods beneath our feet, by chance  
 And the blind law of lineage? ('Prelude', I, 303–6)

Kiuprili offers a conservative quizzing of these arguments, asking what are the 'shallow sophisms of a *popular choice*? / What people? How convened?' ('Prelude', I, 354–55). At times, Kiuprili sounds like all the opponents of Robespierre in Coleridge and Southey's play, trying to forestall Emerick's seizure of power by labelling him a 'remorseless tyrant' who will amuse the crowds 'with *sounds* of liberty' and warning of an Illyrian terror when 'liberty shall be proclaimed alone [...] Till Vengeance hath her fill' ('Prelude', II, 99–101, 103). Casimir looks beyond Paine and the early days of the Revolution to argue for the kind of military dictatorship created by Napoleon: 'What better claim can sov'reign wish or need, / Than the free voice of men who love their country? / Those chiefly who have fought for't? [...] Whence sprang the name of Emperor? Was it not / By Nature's fiat?' ('Prelude', I, 315–17, 321–22). Against such claims, there is a running commentary on Emerick/Napoleon as sham king, as Emerick is described as 'this king of the Buskin! ... That from some vagrant actor's tiring room, / Hath stolen at once his speech and crown!' (III, ii, 102, 104–5). While Emerick can only play the ruler, the true nobility of Glycine and Bethlen shines through the masks they have been forced by circumstances to wear.

This Burkean sense of 'natural' nobility leads to a sense of the political order itself as a 'natural' extension of the family, as the political is dissolved in the domestic. While *The Fall of Robespierre* stages the absorption of the private and domestic into the public and political – and while *Remorse* ultimately refuses to choose between private emotion and public action – *Zapolya* readily presents the nation as an affective reflection of the family. As Andreas accepts the throne, he thanks not his supporters but his 'Heroic mother! — / But what can breath add to that sacred name?' (IV, iii, 43–44). In praising Kiuprili, he proclaims, 'loyalty is but the public form / Of the sublimest friendship'; here the political is literally the personal. Sarolta closes the play, claiming the right to serve still as their host and directly linking the national scene with hearth and home:

None love their country, but who love their home:  
 For freedom can with those alone abide,  
 Who wear the golden chain, with honest pride,  
 Of love and duty, at their own fire-side:  
 While mad ambition ever doth caress  
 Its own sure fate, in its own restlessness! (IV, iii, 77–82)

‘None love their country, but who love their home’: this could easily be the motto of most of Coleridge’s reflective poems of the later 1790s, from ‘The Eolian Harp’ and ‘Frost at Midnight’ to the more overtly political ‘Fears in Solitude’. Here, however, it is worth noting just how different the context is. First published in 1817 and then performed at the Surrey Theatre the following year, *Zapolya*’s statement on local and national attachment appears in the years of civil unrest that followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. His references to ‘mad ambition’ leading to ‘Its own sure fate in its own restlessness’ may invoke the fallen French emperor, but they also caution against those whose ‘restlessness’ might lead them to shed their ‘golden chain / Of love and duty’ to pursue reform at home. Such sentiments, while recalling the politics of the earlier poetry, are more closely aligned with the emerging dramatic form in which *Zapolya* would eventually appear: the melodrama, a form, as Peter Brooks argues, arising during the French Revolution to contain its radicalism on stage.<sup>14</sup>

Adapted by Thomas John Dibdin with Coleridge’s approval, *Zapolya; or, The War Wolf: A Grand Melodrama* had its premiere at the Surrey Theatre on 9 February 1818. Given its many shifts in form during its composition, its final transformation into the popular melodrama should probably not surprise us. *Zapolya* is, in many ways, a play in search of a genre. Approached by Byron in March 1815 to write another play, Coleridge first indicated his desire to try his hand again at tragedy; by October, however, he had begun to call his play a ‘dramatic Entertainment’ (CL IV, 591) and by January had altogether abandoned ‘tragedy’ for other labels. When Byron left England for the Continent, Coleridge continued his negotiations with the theatre, working through Byron’s friend Douglas Kinnaird and his publisher, John Murray. Writing to the latter on 6 June 1816, he states that he is completing ‘two musical entertainments’, working with ‘the advice of a [theatre] manager’. He goes on to say that, while he wants *Zapolya*, as a *poem*, to be published as written, he understands that Kinnaird and the Drury Lane managers need to present it ‘as a Melo-drama, with songs and choruses, & the Story transmuted into a domestic not a political occurrence – the Usurper to be made a Baron &c &c’ (CL IV, 644). As J. C. C. Mays notes, Coleridge’s decision to publish *Zapolya* as a ‘poem in dialogue’ had Drury Lane’s blessing, ‘on the reckoning that publication in this form would be an advantage to the melodrama’ (CPW III, ii, 1330). *Zapolya* is thus resolutely a creation of the Regency stage, its text serving at once as the foundation of, and promotional tool for, the eventual stage drama. While the play was never performed at Drury Lane – and while Coleridge would be angered that Charles Robert Maturin’s spectacular, gothic *Bertram*, considered on the recommendation of Walter Scott, would prove a success there – he

nevertheless continued to search for a venue, finally hitting on the Surrey when Dibdin moved there as manager. Dibdin's adaptation played for ten nights; its success was great enough for Dibdin to choose it for his benefit night to close the season.

Like all of Coleridge's plays, *Zapolya* embodies his lifelong attempt to unite traditional drama with the contemporary stage practice, and to produce plays for a modern theatre open to the struggles of his day. Coleridge's interest in the drama extends well beyond these few plays: to various abandoned dramatic projects, to his translation of Schiller and to his famous critiques of Shakespeare. The concerns of a play such as *Zapolya* are also found in Coleridge's earlier poetic works, which explore the boundaries of public and private and how they might map onto the new political and domestic realities of the Revolutionary and then post-Waterloo years. As with his finest political poem, 'Fears in Solitude', Coleridge's dramatic works display a persistent antipathy not just to political violence and war but also to the simplistic dualisms (activity and passivity, patriotism and treason) that such unnatural states produce. It is also striking that 'conversation' as a path to 'dramatic truth' moves as a mode throughout Coleridge's most famous poems, whether the staged dialogues of 'The Rime' and 'The Foster Mother's Tale' or the imagined listeners of 'Frost at Midnight', 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' and 'Dejection'. Coleridge the dramatist is also a creator of dramatic poems.

### Notes

- 1 Such views both are on display in standard histories of the drama and theatre such as Allardyce Nicoll's *Early Nineteenth-Century Drama 1800–1850*, vol. IV of *A History of English Drama 1660–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1960), and shape such fine critical readings of the poetic drama as Alan Richardson's *Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (State College: Penn State University Press, 1988) and Michael Simpson's *Closet Performances: Political Exhibition and Prohibition in the Dramas of Byron and Shelley* (Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 2 *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie Marchand, 12 vols (London: John Murray, 1978), VIII, 210.
- 3 Letter to Grosvenor Charles Bedford, 27 January 1813, *CLRS*, 2212.
- 4 Cf. Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48–89.
- 5 *Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 4 vols (London, 1836–39), I, 3n.
- 6 Matthew Buckley, "A Dream of Murder": The Fall of Robespierre and the Tragic Imagination', *Studies in Romanticism*, 44 (2005), 515–49. Cf. Daniel E. White, 'Introduction to *The Fall of Robespierre*', Introduction | Romantic Circles (romantic-circles.org).

- 7 All references to this and other plays by Coleridge are to *CPW*, III, and are cited parenthetically either by act and line number or by act, scene and line number.
- 8 Cf. Jeffrey N. Cox, 'Ideology and Genre in the Anti-Revolutionary Drama of the 1790s', *ELH*, 58 (1991), 579–610.
- 9 Joanna Baillie, *A Series of Plays ... on the Passions*, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1798, 1802, 1812), III, xiv–xv.
- 10 At least one reviewer noted the resemblance. Cf. *The Satirist* 12 (March 1813), 270.
- 11 Cf. John David Moore, 'Coleridge and the "modern Jacobinical drama": *Oso-rio*, *Remorse*, and the Development of Coleridge's Critique of the Stage, 1797–1816', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 85 (1982), 443–64; and Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 12 Cf. note to the copy of the second edition of *Remorse* given to Sarah Hutchinson; cited in *CPW* II, 819n.
- 13 Cf. Frederick Burwick, *Playing to the Crowd: London Popular Theatre, 1780–1830* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 55, which connects the war-wolf figure to Coleridge's political attacks upon the "the hybrid monster" of Jacobinism'.
- 14 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 15.