Title of Paper: **Lyric Laziness: The Case for the “Deanthologization” of Mary Coleridge**
Author: Matthew Hodge
Affiliation: Independent researcher
Section: Articles
Date of Publication: May, 2015
Issue: 3.2

Abstract:

The lyrical poem is the predominant form used by Mary Coleridge and her great-great-uncle in law, the venerated poet Samuel Coleridge. From Orpheus to Auden, the lyric poem has been used to praise civilization and thank “The Unknown Citizen,” to praise and to eulogize, to give structure to ideas and to set words free to be sung. Most poets have used the lyrical form, because it is the most basic form of poetry, and as defined by Samuel Coleridge in his treatise *Biographia Literaria*, there are “the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (“Biographia” 90). Without critiquing the structural elements of her poetry, it is by these cardinal points that Mary Coleridge presents a mediocre collection of lyrical poetry, one that neither adheres to the truth of nature nor modifies colors of the imagination, and therefore by her own great-great-grand uncle’s standards should not be anthologized.

Keywords: lyric poetry, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Coleridge, anthologization

Author Bio: Matthew Hodge has an MA in English literature and is a community college instructor.

Author email: matthewroyhodge@gmail.com
The lyrical poem is the predominant form used by Mary Coleridge and her great-great-uncle in law, the venerated poet Samuel Coleridge. The lyric poem contains a “phantom of a tune, a time signature, a harmony” (Albright 1), and is “the purest and simplest form of poetry” (Lewis 3). From Orpheus to Auden, the lyric poem has been used to praise civilization and thank “The Unknown Citizen,” to praise and to eulogize, to give structure to ideas and to set words free to be sung. Most poets have used the lyrical form, because it is the most basic form of poetry, and as defined by Samuel Coleridge in his treatise *Biographia Literaria*, there are “the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination” (“Biographia” 90). Without critiquing the structural elements of her poetry, it is by these cardinal points that Mary Coleridge presents a mediocre collection of lyrical poetry, one that neither adheres to the truth of nature nor modifies colors of the imagination, and therefore by her own great-great-grand uncle’s standards should not be anthologized.

“Exciting the sympathy of the reader by the faithful adherence to the truth of nature” is something that Mary Coleridge has difficulty doing. Her poetry itself was composed for her own pleasure, as she was “shy of publication” (Leighton 611), but even so she simply fails many times to show a universal truth of nature in her work. Both Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson are examples of female poets that feared publication, yet they attained a wide audience later because of their ability to write of personal matters and relate them to universal or natural truths. Many of the failures of Mary Coleridge in expressing universal truths stem from the brevity of her poems and
The abject ambiguity that brevity creates, in poems such as “L’Oiseau Bleu,” “Mortal Combat,” and “Friends – With a Difference.”

“L’Oiseau Bleu” creates a problem for the reader because the poet catches sight of a blue bird in the first stanza, and the second strangely reads, “The sky above was blue at last,/The sky beneath me blue in blue./A moment, ere the bird is past,/It caught his image as he flew” (Leighton 619). The statement that links the poem to some kind of universal truth is missing, and the truths that could be developed in the alluringly queer statements, “The sky above was blue at last” and “It caught his image as he flew” are never dwelt on enough to pleasure the reader with any kind of revelation of truth. Then the poem becomes distracting and the ease of the lyrical reading is disrupted as the reader must reread and search for meaning. Both Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth’s poetry attempted to find the sublime in the commonplace (Albright 111-114), and in order to do this, the lyric must be extended to speak truth to the reader. If nature is the “language of God” (McKusick 31) to Samuel Coleridge, then it is quite obvious God has said nothing in this poem, or rather God was cut off before He was allowed to say anything.

The distracting effect of the hasty ending in “L’Oiseau Bleu” on the reader is similar with the frustrating sudden changes of lines that appear in the brief lyrical poems “Mortal Combat” and “Friends – With a Difference,” and again the natural or universal truth is lost as a result. “Mortal Combat” seems ripe with meaning at the onset, but then becomes muddled in confusing and contradicting ideas. The narrator fights and stabs someone who was her “friend,” because “you dared take off your crown,/And be a man like other men” (Leighton 616). While some may interpret this
as a religious metaphor for Christ we have no indication of the circumstances surrounding the “Mortal Combat.” It is because the poem is overtly personal and does not address any universal truth that the reader can relate to, it seems incomplete and alienates the reader. Samuel Coleridge later in *Biographia Literaria* noted that the second characteristic of poetic genius is a “choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer” (McKusick 86).

Both the lack of universal truth and distance from the poet are displayed again clearly in “Friends – With a Difference.” In this poem, she presents an interesting beginning to the poem, with supposedly six different types of actions that friend provide, and then the odd statement “But seven’s the sacred number/That keeps the soul alive” (Leighton 616). The final stanza presents what seems to be a strange aside to the reader: “And first and last of seven,/And all the world and more,/Is she I need in Heaven,/And may not need before” (617). The final line contains a clichéd expression with “all the world and more,” and seems to lend to the collapse of meaning in the last stanza. The reader wonders, “Who is she? Why does she need her in heaven, but not now?” and then simply gives up trying to make sense of the poem. It seems feminist, but the inability to tack on some truth in the final stanza would anger Samuel Coleridge. After all, Coleridge looked for the “perfect truth of nature in...images and descriptions” (Albright 106), and a good number of Mary Coleridge’s poems simply do not contain this element of natural images and descriptions, but rather personal situations that the reader could not understand without intense biographical research.
Now that the point has been made about the inability of Mary Coleridge to attain “a faithful adherence to the truth of nature,” and her somewhat artistically destructive desire to write poetry that dealt with her personal issues and not universal ones, one might be able to imagine Samuel Coleridge himself pleading for her ouster from the various anthologies she inhabits. A contrast can be made with the way Coleridge praises Wordsworth’s “The Green Linnet,” in the *Biographia Literaria*, saying “the perfect truth of nature in his images and descriptions, as taken immediately from nature and proving a long and genial intimacy with the very spirit which gives the physiognomic expression to all works of nature” (Albridge 106). If physiognomy is the action of understanding the outside aspects of the natural environment, and being able to discern the inner truths accompanying nature, then Mary Coleridge’s poetry is certainly underdeveloped. Some anthologies praise her for her “intellectual precision” (Armstrong 756), and if the ability to simply create short poems with rhyming lines is “intellectual precision,” then she definitely has it. However, other female poets of that era, like Dickinson, Bronte, and Rossetti were able to write about personal feelings and issues and relate them to universal ideas, satisfying the reader with not only a rhyme but a truth accompanying it. Samuel himself would have critiqued Mary by saying that she only shows personal events, and not a “communicative intelligence,” the term for Samuel Coleridge’s idea of God’s absolute truths inherent in nature, or the “glimpses of His absolute knowledge” (Jackson 82).

Secondly, Samuel Coleridge could have chided Mary for her inability to show “the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination.”
Frankly, Mary Coleridge did not have the ability to express herself in striking or original words, since quite a few of her poems involve sacrificing content for rhyme consistency, and a good amount of her poetry seems rushed and not revised or improved on. She also seems to write without clear revision and her poems are quite sloppy.

Her inability to use the “colours of imagination” shows itself the clearest in her constant use of clichéd speech. “The fire, the lamp, and I, were alone together” begins this list of clichés with, “The fire, the lamp, and I, were alone together./Out in the street it was wild and windy weather” (Leighton 626). The start of this poem sounds a bit childish and reminds us of the famous beginning “It was a dark and stormy night.” In “Our Lady,” “The noblest lady in the land/Would have given up half her days/Would have cut off her right hand,/To bear a child that was God of the land” (Oxford 615). This poem does qualify as having an excellent universal message: God does not favor the rich, as He favored poor Mary, but the poem is perhaps cheapened by these two middle lines and their lack of originality. This is why Mary fails at Samuel Coleridge’s ideal of “Imagination as a means of human improvement” (Jackson 99), because she never allows herself to think outside the conventional clichéd words of yesteryear.

There is also the sophomoric problem of adding words simply to preserve the rhyme scheme, which is a constant problem in Mary Coleridge’s poems. Samuel Coleridge might cringe at the first line of “Unwelcome,” “We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise” (Oxford 818). The extra very makes the previous very seem meaningless and the poem suddenly seems like it was written by a high
school student. Even the most novice reader of poetry realizes immediately that Mary has committed an act of intellectual laziness; she has simply inserted the extra very to maintain the meter of the rhyme, when there was a chance to insert something better and change the rhyme. It also reverberates as a cheap attempt of internal rhyme. This seems to lack what Samuel Coleridge considered poetic genius’ fourth category, “DEPTH and ENERGY of THOUGHT [emphasis added by Coleridge]” (McKusick 86).

Another simple repetition of words appears in the poem “I envy not the dead that rest,” and is by far the largest sign of laziness in order to fit a rhyme of all her poems so far. The second stanza of the poem reads, “If ever men were laid in earth,/and might in earth repose/Where spirits have no second birth-/Those, those, I envy, those” (Leighton 615). The final line of “Those, those, I envy, those” might become an excellent final refrain for the poem’s 4 stanzas, but it seems as though it was forced into place to produce a correctly metered rhyme with “repose.” It is this lack of ability to use repetition in a forceful or at least reinforcing manner that disaffects the reader.

“Master and Guest” is a poem about a female inn-keeper that accepts a particularly loathsome guest, and has a stanza that stands out as faulty, “‘Now sit you by my side,’ he said./’Else may I neither eat nor drink./You would not have me starve, I think./’He ate the offerings of the dead” (617). The final line of “offerings of the dead” is particularly confusing and seems like a rhyme forced into place to rhyme with the word “said.” The phrase “offerings of the dead,” has no anchoring point in the text and the reader is confused by it. It seems that the phrase was added simply in
order to preserve the rhyme scheme, and nothing else. These three strange additions that Mary makes to her lines disrupt the reader’s concentration and scatter the meaning, destroying the enjoyment that the reader should find from her work. If the genius poet “diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination” (“Biographia” 94), then it is quite obvious that Samuel might think her poetry poor. These poems are riddled by clichéd expressions and words inserted to preserve rhymes; but the larger problem that would stand out to Samuel is the inherent sloppiness and lack of revision in her work.

Lack of revision and sloppiness is difficult to determine; many times a poet will seem lazy but actually be formulating effective techniques to surprise you later, and even the sloppiest looking poems are sometimes written with the deepest meaning (such as e e cummings’ poetry). However, two obvious signs of Mary’s laziness of imagination are her ability to negatively stun the reader by suddenly inserting a strange element into the poem, or making a statement too ambiguous to be understood.

“A Clever Woman” would be a bit cleverer if she was able to clear up the meaning of the poem and make it an actual statement, but unfortunately the poem ends in confusion because of its final couplet. The first stanza states “But woman’s woman, even when/She reads her Ethics in the Greek,” and slightly confuses the reader because of the brevity of “woman’s woman” or that “woman is a woman,” and this is again repeated in the second stanza. It seems to be a call for liberation from the oppression of men, but then the confusing third stanza appears, stating, “And then you needs must die – ah, well!/ I knew you not, you loved not me./’Twas not because the
darkness fell./You saw not what there is to see./But I that saw and could not tell -/O evil Angel set me free!” Samuel Coleridge’s love of “perfect sweetness of versification” might find fault with the second line “I knew you not, you loved not me,” and its repetition, but even Samuel would arrive at the end of the poem and say, “Who is this evil Angel, and what is it setting her free from?” The first two stanzas deal with how outsiders view women incorrectly regardless of their attributes, and the third something completely different, even ending with an evil Angel and darkness. This sudden and jolting reference to Hell and/or evil appears in “Wilderspin” as well, and in many other poems when her terse description revolts into sudden self-judgment. The Platonic system of imagination that Samuel Coleridge idealized reduced “the aggregate of human knowledge to a system” (Jackson 73). This system is disrupted by the incongruence of Mary’s poetry.

Finally, many of her poems are so ambiguous that even though she uses adequate imagination in describing what something is, she never reveals what it might mean. One example of this is “L’ Oiseau Bleu,” in which she describes the flight of the bird and possibly identifies herself with the bird, but the final line of “It caught his image as he flew,” makes little if any sense, and the reader is left wondering and wanting more. “Gifts” as well has a very ambiguous ending. The first stanza is certainly a reference to Christ, as a rose wreath is placed on a man’s head becomes “crackling thorns” (Leighton 617), but the final dart that she hurls at her foe’s heart turns into “a golden staff” (618). What could she mean by this? Could it be the golden staff of Hermes? Could it be the Incan god of the sun’s staff? A royal scepter? Again, one must shut Mary’s book of poetry and take a glance at the Internet if one does not
The Victorian

know. Above all things, Samuel Coleridge looked for a “delightful harmony which ever will be found where philosophy is united with such poetry…by those who have endeavored to reconcile all the powers of our nature into one harmony” (McKusick 85). Mary Coleridge never finds this harmony.

All of these examples and Samuel Coleridge’s quotes in reaction to them prove a solitary fact: If Samuel Coleridge would have seen and critiqued Mary Coleridge’s poetry, he would have had a lot to say about her inability to follow his ideal of poetry. It is her lack of ability to relate her personal experiences to natural truths, as well as her inability to attach lyric rhyme with her imagination that destroys the ultimate products of her poems. While this essay may seem one-sided and perhaps vicious, it is true that she has written good poems, “Marriage” and “True to myself and I, and false to all” are excellent examples of poems that she composed well. However, it seems that because she broke Samuel Coleridge’s two conventions of “universal or natural truth” and “imagination” in the majority of her poems, her work would probably have been rejected for anthologization by her famous relative.

Works Cited


The Victorian


<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=9069&pageno=1>


