

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Shorter Works
and Fragments

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antiquity of the accentual marks, he would have completely overthrown his own ingenious scheme of modulation in poetry. As the marks must have been added (except on doubtful words) solely as assistants to right pronunciation, it is not credible that they should have been placed in poetry, so as not only to give no assistance, but to bewilder and mislead. This phaenomenon can be explained by the lateness of the invention only.—On the whole, therefore, we cannot but be of opinion that the essayist should have acquiesced in the following sensible remark of his ingenious predecessor. “Many diligent persons have with learning and industry laboured to prove, from passages of ancient authors, and other strong testimonies, that these marks of accentuation were not known to the old Greeks. And they have, I think, proved it satisfactorily: which yet perhaps they might have done as clearly by a shorter way, I mean by this plain argument, that such helps and directions in the pronunciation of a language of any country, are not requisite in writings, drawn up in the vernacular tongue of that nation for the use of its natives, who must be supposed not to want instruction in that respect.” Foster on Accent and Quantity, p. 178.¹

The learned and ingenious essay, of which we have given so full an account, is dedicated to lord Thurlow, and has been attributed to a dignitary of the church. It certainly possesses that manliness of style, which distinguishes the more important writings of the champion of orthodoxy. If it has been rightly *fathered*, it is an amusing coincidence, that old bishop Gardiner (the vigorous defender of the then established church) published an essay on a similar subject.²

REVIEW OF [M. G. LEWIS] *The Monk*

Anonymous review of [M. G. Lewis] *The Monk* (3 vols 1796) in *Critical Review* NS XIX (1796 [1797]) 194–200; cf *CL* I 318. In its objection to the currently popular sensationalism, its emphasis on the moral function of fiction, and its analysis of the psychological effect of the supernatural in literature, C’s review anticipates theories associated with *LB* in *WW*’s 1800 “Preface” and *BL* ch 14 (*CC*) II 5–6. C’s disapproval of Lewis’s influence is expressed in stronger terms in a letter of 1802 (*CL* II 905), and he echoes opinions expressed here in margi-

¹ Foster 177–8 (var).

² In 1797 Horsley was bp of Rochester (and drew C’s fire both in public and in private: *Lects* 1795—*CC*—285; *CL* I 102; *CN* I 53). C would have found in Foster (viii, xxiii) passing references to

the well-known controversy about the pronunciation of Greek between Stephen Gardiner, bp of Winchester, and Sir John Cheke. Their correspondence was published in 1555.

nalìa to James Sedgwick's *Hints to the Public and the Legislature, on Evangelical Preaching* (1808–10), annotated in 1810 (CM—CC).

DATE. Feb 1797.

The horrible and the preternatural have usually seized on the popular taste, at the rise and decline of literature. Most powerful stimulants, they can never be required except by the torpor of an unawakened, or the languor of an exhausted, appetite. The same phaenomenon, therefore, which we hail as a favourable omen in the belles lettres of Germany, impresses a degree of gloom in the compositions of our countrymen. We trust, however, that satiety will banish what good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured. But, cheaply as we estimate romances in general, we acknowledge, in the work before us, the offspring of no common genius. The tale is similar to that of Santon Barsista in the *Guardian*.¹ Ambrosio, a monk, surnamed the Man of Holiness, proud of his own undeviating rectitude, and severe to the faults of others, is successfully assailed by the tempter of mankind, and seduced to the perpetration of rape and murder, and finally precipitated into a contract in which he consigns his soul to everlasting perdition.

The larger part of the three volumes is occupied by the underplot, which, however, is skilfully and closely connected with the main story, and is subservient to its development. The tale of the bleeding nun is truly terrific; and we could not easily recollect a bolder or more happy conception than that of the burning cross on the forehead of the wandering Jew (a mysterious character, which, though copied as to its more prominent features from Schiller's incomprehensible Armenian, does, nevertheless, display great vigour of fancy).² But the character of Matilda, the chief agent in the seduction of Antonio, appears to us to be the author's master-piece. It is, indeed, exquisitely imagined, and as exquisitely supported. The whole work is distinguished by the variety and impressiveness of its incidents; and the author every-where discovers an imagination rich, powerful, and fervid. Such are the excellencies—the errors and defects are more numerous, and (we are sorry to add) of greater importance.

All events are levelled into one common mass, and become almost

¹ *Guardian* 148 (31 Aug 1713).

Jew as he appears in Schiller's romance *Der Geisterseher* is RX 242–60.

² The classic discussion of C's early interest in the figure of the Wandering

equally probable, where the order of nature may be changed whenever the author's purposes demand it. No address is requisite to the accomplishment of any design; and no pleasure therefore can be received from the perception of *difficulty surmounted*. The writer may make us wonder, but he cannot surprise us. For the same reasons a romance is incapable of exemplifying a moral truth. No proud man, for instance, will be made less proud by being told that Lucifer once seduced a presumptuous monk. *Incredulus odit*.¹ Or even if, believing the story, he should deem his virtue less secure, he would yet acquire no lessons of prudence, no feelings of humility. Human prudence can oppose no sufficient shield to the power and cunning of supernatural beings; and the privilege of being proud might be fairly conceded to him who could rise superior to all earthly temptations, and whom the strength of the spiritual world alone would be adequate to overwhelm. So falling, he would fall with glory, and might reasonably welcome his defeat with the haughty emotions of a conqueror. As far, therefore, as the story is concerned, the praise which a romance can claim, is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal; and so many are the calamities of life, that he who has done this, has not written uselessly. The children of sickness and of solitude shall thank him.—To this praise, however, our author has not entitled himself. The sufferings which he describes are so frightful and intolerable, that we break with abruptness from the delusion, and indignantly suspect the man of a species of brutality, who could find a pleasure in wantonly imagining them; and the abominations which he portrays with no hurrying pencil, are such as the observation of character by no means demanded; such as “no observation of character can justify, because no good man would willingly suffer them to pass, however transiently, through his own mind.”² The merit of a novelist is in proportion (not simply to the effect, but) to the *pleasurable* effect which he produces. Situations of torment, and images of naked horror, are easily conceived; and a writer in whose works they abound, deserves our gratitude almost equally with him who should drag us by way of sport through a military hospital, or force us to sit at the dissecting-table of a natural philosopher. To trace the nice boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions,—to reach those limits, yet never to pass them,—*hic labor, hoc opus est*.³ Figures that shock the imagination, and narratives that mangle the feelings, rarely discover *genius*, and always betray a low and vulgar *taste*. Nor has our

¹ Horace *The Art of Poetry* 188 (var) “He disbelieves, and revolts at it.”

Poets ed Hill 1 173.

² Samuel Johnson, quoting John Clarke, in “Milton” *Lives of the English*

³ Virgil *Aeneid* 6.129 (var) “This is the toil, and this is the task.”

author indicated less ignorance of the human heart in the management of the principal character. The wisdom and goodness of providence have ordered that the tendency of vicious actions to deprave the heart of the perpetrator, should diminish in proportion to the greatness of his temptations. Now, in addition to constitutional warmth and irresistible opportunity, the monk is impelled to incontinence by friendship, by compassion, by gratitude, by all that is amiable, and all that is estimable; yet in a few weeks after his first frailty, the man who had been described as possessing much general humanity, a keen and vigorous understanding, with habits of the most exalted piety, degenerates into an uglier fiend than the gloomy imagination of Danté would have ventured to picture. Again, the monk is described as feeling and acting under the influence of an appetite which could not co-exist with his other emotions. The romance-writer possesses an unlimited power over situations; but he must scrupulously make his characters act in congruity with them. Let him work *physical* wonders only, and we will be content to *dream* with him for a while; but the first *moral* miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us. Thus our judgment remains unoffended, when, announced by thunders and earthquakes, the spirit appears to Ambrosio involved in blue fires that increase the cold of the cavern; and we acquiesce in the power of the silver myrtle which made gates and doors fly open at its touch, and charmed every eye into sleep. But when a mortal, fresh from the impression of that terrible appearance, and in the act of evincing for the first time the witching force of this myrtle, is represented as being at the same moment agitated by so fleeting an appetite as that of lust, our own feelings convince us that this is not improbable, but impossible; not preternatural, but contrary to nature. The extent of the powers that may exist, we can never ascertain; and therefore we feel no great difficulty in yielding a temporary belief to any, the strangest, situation of *things*. But that situation once conceived, how beings like ourselves would feel and act in it, our own feelings sufficiently instruct us; and we instantly reject the clumsy fiction that does not harmonise with them. These are the two *principal* mistakes in *judgment*, which the author has fallen into; but we cannot wholly pass over the frequent incongruity of his style with his subjects. It is gaudy where it should have been severely simple; and too often the mind is offended by phrases the most trite and colloquial, where it demands and had expected a sternness and solemnity of diction.

A more grievous fault remains,—a fault for which no literary excellence can atone,—a fault which all other excellence does but aggravate, as adding subtlety to a poison by the elegance of its preparation. Mild-

ness of censure would here be criminally misplaced, and silence would make us accomplices. Not without reluctance then, but in full conviction that we are performing a duty, we declare it to be our opinion, that the Monk is a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale. The temptations of Ambrosio are described with a libidinous minuteness, which, we sincerely hope, will receive its best and only adequate censure from the offended conscience of the author himself. The shameless harlotry of Matilda, and the trembling innocence of Antonia, are seized with equal avidity, as vehicles of the most voluptuous images; and though the tale is indeed a tale of horror, yet the most painful impression which the work left on our minds was that of great acquirements and splendid genius employed to furnish a *mormo*¹ for children, a poison for youth, and a provocative for the debauchee. Tales of enchantments and witchcraft can never be *useful*: our author has contrived to make them *pernicious*, by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition. He takes frequent occasion, indeed, to manifest his sovereign contempt for the latter, both in his own person, and (most incongruously) in that of his principal characters; and that his respect for the *former* is not excessive, we are forced to conclude from the treatment which its inspired writings receive from him. Ambrosio discovers Antonia reading—

“He examined the book which she had been reading, and had now placed upon the table. It was the Bible.

“ ‘How!’ said the friar to himself, ‘Antonia reads the Bible, and is still so ignorant?’

“But, upon a further inspection, he found that Elvira had made exactly the same remark. That prudent mother, while she admired the beauties of the sacred writings, was convinced that, unrestricted, no reading more improper could be permitted a young woman. Many of the narratives can only tend to excite ideas the worst calculated for a female breast: every thing is called plainly and roundly by its name; and the *annals of a brothel would scarcely furnish a greater choice of indecent expressions*. Yet this is the book which young women are recommended to study, which is put into the hands of children, able to comprehend little more than those passages of which they had better remain ignorant, and which but too *frequently inculcates the first rudiments of vice*, and gives the first alarm to the still sleeping passions. Of this was Elvira so

¹ A Greek word signifying a bogey, bugbear, or the like.

fully convinced, that she would have preferred putting into her daughter's hands 'Amadis de Gaul,' or 'The Valiant Champion, Tirante the White,' and would sooner have authorised her studying the lewd exploits of Don Galaor, or the lascivious jokes of the Damsel Plazer di mi vida." Vol. ii. p. 247.¹

The impiety of this falsehood can be equalled only by its impudence. This is indeed as if a Corinthian harlot, clad from head to foot in the transparent thinness of the Cöan vest,² should affect to view with prudish horror the naked knee of a Spartan matron! If it be possible that the author of these blasphemies is a Christian, should he not have reflected that the only passage in the scriptures*, which could give a shadow of plausibility to the *weakest* of these expressions, is represented as being spoken by the Almighty himself? But if he be an infidel, he has acted consistently enough with that character, in his endeavours first to inflame the fleshly appetites, and then to pour contempt on the only book which would be adequate to the task of recalming them. We believe it not absolutely impossible that a mind may be so deeply depraved by the habit of reading lewd and voluptuous tales, as to use even the Bible in conjuring up the spirit of uncleanness. The most innocent expressions might become the first link in the chain of association, when a man's soul had been so poisoned; and we believe it not absolutely impossible that he might extract pollution from the word of purity, and, in a literal sense, *turn the grace of God into wantonness*.

We have been induced to pay particular attention to this work, from the unusual success which it has experienced. It certainly possesses much real merit, in addition to its meretricious attractions. Nor must it be forgotten that the author is a man of rank and fortune.—Yes! the author of the Monk signs himself a LEGISLATOR!—We stare and tremble.⁴

* Ezekiel, chap. xxiii.³

¹ *The Monk* (1796) II 247–8 (var); the italic of the final phrase is C's. Lewis's references are appropriately Spanish and chivalric: both the *Amadis of Gaul* and *Tirant lo Blanch* (a 15th-century Catalan romance) are mentioned in *Don Quixote*. Don Galaor is the perpetually amorous brother of the more serious Amadis, and Plazer de mi Vida ("Joy-of-my-Life") appears in the story of Tirant. C repeats his objection to "this damnable French

heart-haunting Impurity in the envelope of Modesty" in a note to James Sedgwick *Hints to the Public and Legislature* (4 pts 1808–10) ii 46.

² Cf e.g. Horace *Satires* 1.2.101, Propertius *Elegies* 1.2.2.

³ I.e. "the whoredoms of Aholah and Aholibah".

⁴ Lewis was MP for Hindon in Wiltshire 1796–1800.

The poetry interspersed through the volumes is, in general, far above mediocrity. We shall present our readers with the following exquisitely tender elegy, which, we may venture to prophesy, will melt and delight the heart, when ghosts and hobgoblins shall be found only in the lumber-garret of a circulating library.

"THE EXILE.

"Farewell, oh native Spain! farewell for ever!

These banished eyes shall view thy coasts no more:
A mournful presage tells my heart, that never
Gonzalvo's steps again shall press thy shore.

"Hushed are the winds; while soft the vessel sailing
With gentle motion plows the unruffled main,
I feel my bosom's boasted courage failing,
And curse the waves which bear me far from Spain.

"I see it yet! Beneath yon blue clear heaven
Still do the spires, so well-beloved, appear.
From yonder craggy point the gale of even
Still wafts my native accents to mine ear.

"Propped on some moss-crowned rock, and gaily singing,
There in the sun his nets the fisher dries;
Oft have I heard the plaintive ballad, bringing
Scenes of past joys before my sorrowing eyes.

"Ah! happy swain! he waits the accustomed hour,
When twilight-gloom obscures the closing sky;
Then gladly seeks his loved paternal bower,
And shares the feast his native fields supply.

"Friendship and Love, his cottage guests, receive him
With honest welcome and with smile sincere;
No threatening woes of present joys bereave him;
No sigh his bosom owns, his cheek no tear.

"Ah! happy swain! such bliss to me denying,
Fortune thy lot with envy bids me view;
Me, who, from home and Spain an exile flying,
Bid all I value, all I love, adieu.

"No more mine ear shall lift the well-known ditty
Sung by some mountain-girl, who tends her goats,