

IMAGINATION, SUBVERSION AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

**SARA COLERIDGE'S *PHANTASMION*: IMAGINATION, SUBVERSION AND
FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY**

By

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ABSTRACT

Sara Coleridge was a woman whose voice was not radical enough to forge an immediate place in literary history. She clung, not expecting to be recognized, to the words of her father, yet she is present in her fairy tale, *Phantasmion* (1837), silently persisting and invoking her own literary resurrection. In working to establish a modern context for Sara Coleridge's fairy tale, my thesis attempts to rescue fantasy from its exile in never-never land and to incorporate it into contemporary conversations about gender and identity. After discussing Romantic ideas of fantasy and subjectivity, I intend to examine the heritage of the feminine Romantic writer, tracing her paternal influences in an attempt to work towards situating and recovering a feminine Romanticism, that is at once tied to and yet distinct from that more prominently associated with the "big six," male Romantic poets. Challenging the criticism that seeks to prevent Sara Coleridge from attaining a distinct literary identity, I will approach her through the 'kaleidoscopic' lens of fantasy, through the mirror of her fairy tale, *Phantasmion* (1837). A conservative, female writer, Sara Coleridge employs the fairy tale to subversively explore alternative modes of gendered identity and experience. Featuring disembodied characters, the fairy tale genre enables Sara Coleridge to disengage herself from patriarchal restraints on the body. A metaphor for the female quest for identity, the fairy tale genre reveals, in its handling by Sara Coleridge, a less glamorous, but perhaps equally subversive member of feminine Romanticism.

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INTRODUCTION:

THE FAIRY TALE GENRE AND SARA COLERIDGE

The mind, which is where hallucinations come from,
shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there
to start with, that didn't enter from experience,
from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new,
can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world
and reassembles them into visions...

Tony Kushner, *Angels In America*

This study seeks to reveal the significance of the fairy tale genre in relation to Sara Coleridge and to consider fantasy as an explorative device used to formulate alternative modes of gendered identity and experience. A metaphor for the female quest for identity, the fairy tale, and particularly Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion* (1837), is a specialized genre that offers a unique perspective, simultaneously conservative and subversive, which should be included in the current psychological and literary discussions regarding gender and subjectivity. This study intends to establish a sense of plurality and to complicate the accepted notion of Sara Coleridge by suggesting that she is misunderstood; not a blatantly revolutionary figure, she symbolizes a different kind of female Romantic writer, who is domesticated, yet subversive.

In thinking about issues such as paternal influences, dichotomous concepts, masculine and feminine language and Victorian and Romantic periods, this study will, at times, employ contradictory arguments. This mode of argument is, in fact, necessary and appropriate for the purposes of my discussion, one of which is to negotiate an identity for

Sara Coleridge and to offer a definition of feminine Romanticism, or rather a working semblance of one. I may appear to undermine my intention to retrieve Sara Coleridge from the critical examinations that seek to minimize her literary contributions by refusing to consider her as a separate figure, influenced by, and yet different from, her established, literary father, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, rather than exclude her father from this study, which would seem contrived and irresponsible, I will challenge critics and the problematic affiliation between father and daughter by including him. I will create a sense that they are intellectual peers who participated in a relationship, which although strained, was also professional and creative. Another aspect of my discussion that relies on contradiction involves the definition of the fairy tale. Although I argue that its use of dichotomous conceptions restricts, I also argue that the very structure of dichotomous thinking enables subversive action. While referring to language as either masculine or feminine is problematic because it suggests that words and thoughts are gendered, I found it necessary to employ this kind of language in order to criticize traditional conceptions that use gender as a means to suppress and control the female subject. This language also proved essential for the purposes of differentiating gender experiences and developing a distinct, yet multifarious, feminine Romanticism. Finally, it may appear odd that I alternate using the terms, Romantic and Victorian in my discussion of a Victorian fairy tale published in 1837. Apart from this choice being a reflection of what I encountered while researching Sara Coleridge, I believe that in order to develop a genuine portrait of this writer, we must consider both her Romantic influences, as well as her impact on the Victorian Age. This is, in part, why I chose to organize my study so that it begins with a

discussion of the fairy tale genre, followed by a review of the Romantic legacy, an analysis of *Phantasmion*, and finally, a discussion of gender, identity and feminine Romanticism. Female writers were entrenched in binary and patriarchal conceptions and therefore feminine Romanticism is associated with the more prominent, male Romanticism; however, Sara Coleridge's work with fantasy reveals an attempt to work within the stereotypes of femininity while simultaneously questioning these ideas as an author. This study intends to develop a working definition of feminine Romanticism that includes a paradoxical figure, who is the dutiful daughter, maternal educator and subversive writer.

In the introduction, I will begin by providing an eclectic perspective, which I assembled using both traditional and contemporary interpretations of fantasy in an attempt to offer possible definitions of the fairy tale and to situate Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion* in current conversations about gender and identity. After establishing a modern context for the fairy tale and discussing some Romantic and Victorian ideologies of fantasy, I will conclude my introductory remarks by engaging the lineage of the male Romantics in order to reconsider the dynamics of the paternal relationship. In my first chapter, which focuses on *Phantasmion*, I will layer these perspectives, which belong to various critics and the inhabitants of that "plaited nest" in which Sara Coleridge was raised with an examination of her private writing and creative writing. My first chapter is perhaps the core of this study, providing an in-depth analysis of *Phantasmion*. In discussing normative conceptions of the female subject, I argue that fantasy is a subversive medium, used to question and dismantle socially inscribed conceptions while

offering less rigid alternatives. The final chapter of my study will engage in a theoretical discussion of gender and identity, employing feminist theories to negotiate a literary identity for Sara Coleridge and a definition of feminine Romanticism, which includes domestic, subversive writers.

This initial segment of my introduction will attempt to define the fairy tale, using varied interpretations of fantasy, gender and identity. "Subversive, lovely and frequently perverse" fairy tales are windows into a land of self-reflection (Bernheimer xvii). This is the point at which fairy tales and identity merge and it is at this point that this study will begin. Fairy tales play themselves out in psychological landscapes, manifesting a surreal world inside the amorphous space of the imagination; yet, these are not isolated landscapes, detached from the 'real'. Inside the limitless expanse of the imagination, reality is malleable, time is overcome and the laws that govern the sensible and ordinary world are unapologetically broken. It is by twisting and magnifying the real that fairy tales surpass the limits of the rational world and reveal a metaphorical perspective, which allows us to consider ourselves candidly, through the necessary distance of unreality. Interactive places of wonder, fairy tales enable writers to play with perceptions of the self and readers to discover themselves in the mirrors of fiction -- mirrors that paradoxically "tell no lies" (xi).

In Kate Bernheimer's *Mirror, Mirror On The Wall* (1998), a group of female writers examine the fairy tale genre and explore how fairy tales affect their thinking about the self, gender and culture. Her collection questions the perception of the fairy tale as a closed and ridiculous genre; perhaps the epitome of fictional writing, it produces a picture

that is certainly exaggerated, but which, in general, seems not only to reflect its current time accurately, but to also resemble our own. The essays wonder about imaginative writing and its ability to be a social product, conceived and moulded by society, and a reflective, almost animate, mode that initiates queries and contributes to the continuity of cultural dialogue. The “eclectic narratives on self-image, strident critiques of the concept of realism, spiritual biographical journeys and wary inspections of fairy tales’ presumed feminine significance,” which Bernheimer collects suggest that we should consider the genre outside its limited, juvenile context (v). The ensuing discussion of imagination and female subjectivity will extend beyond these limits; focused on resurrecting the genre and its heritage, this project will feature the fairy tale as a site where Sara Coleridge negotiates a ‘feminine Romanticism’. David Jasper ends his essay on fantasy with the words of Sara Coleridge’s father -- for whom imagination is “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (xii). It searches beyond fixed conceptions and travels to what C.S. Lewis calls “the stage where the road passes over the rim of our world. No one’s eyes can see very far beyond that” (Jasper xii). Lewis’ metaphor of the stage suggests the theatrics and excess of enchantment associated with fantasy; the imagination creates costumes, characters, sets and critical frameworks through which we venture. In searching for, and creating this “infinite I AM,” Sara Coleridge uses the paraphernalia of the male Romanticism, making alterations to dogmatic ideologies and conceiving alternative roles for the female subject.

A fictive genre, the fairy tale is a psychological construction, an elaborate reproduction of the social world, which has been renovated by the mind’s elucidations.

Although this is true of most fiction, it is perhaps more so of fairy tales because there is little attempt to resemble reality; in fact, the less human, the more these monsters and fairies succeed in conveying the complexities of human nature. The fairy tale only seemingly abandons the context of the palpable world; it deceives children with the magic of wiry-haired hobbits and witches with green complexions, at once beguiling them and teaching them social roles and ideological dogma. Representations of moral lessons, gendered identities, and social interaction permeate fantasy. The German poet Schiller writes, “deeper meaning resides long ago in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life” (qtd. in Bettelheim 5). Intimating that fiction is truer than life, Schiller blurs the line between reality and fantasy and questions the nature of the distinction. He suggests that fantasy engages what is most human about us, unlike refined knowledge, which feigns connections with us. In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975), Bruno Bettelheim contemplates children’s affiliation with fairy tales and the process of

spinning out daydreams -- ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures. By doing this, the child fits unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content. It is here that fairy tales have unequaled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own. Even more important, the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life. (7)

Bettelheim’s study is limited to the fairy tale and its relation to the psychological development of children. However, his idea that fairy tales are a series of “conscious fantasies” is useful to this discussion. His text focuses on the genre and rescues it from its exile in fantasy so that, as a constructed extension of the ‘real’ world, it may be

considered in historical and social contexts and anchored in this study about gender and identity. The fairy tale is a space in which “formless, nameless anxieties, chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies” (Bettleheim 7) are given access to a collection of fictional forms. Cinderella, complete with glass slipper and fairy godmother, is not merely a story-bound character. As a symbol of femininity, she is used to criticize greed, vanity, jealousy and the unjust social structure; through her we question society’s preoccupation with conversions (homely to elegant, poor to rich) and the identity of the female subject, which is, at best, beautiful, innocent, obedient and affiliated with nature, and, at worst, ugly, immoral and contrived. Interestingly, Carl Woodring compares Sara Coleridge to this fairy tale icon; he suggests that, “everything points to Sara Coleridge as Cinderella, with her maligned absent father as the fairy godmother” (Woodring 212).

The idea that fairy tales are specifically engineered, fictional environments suggests that their characters and plots are not merely sources of entertainment, but rather, manufactured concepts assembled for intellectual and emotional consumption. And so these designed spaces that both reenact and invent what are presumably universal human struggles do not simply offer the psyche frivolous environments in which to play, but rather ideological systems in which to fit and shape itself, particularly shaped sockets through which the psyche is infused with meaning and not with what is true but what is “Right and Wrong” (Bettleheim 117). Tolkien candidly discusses fairy tales and admits that they have far less to do with truth, which possesses a necessary and often frustrating sense of ambiguity, than with polarizations, a structure of oppositions, which Bettleheim believes facilitates the dichotomous nature of the human mind (117). Fairy tales, for

example, provide a suspiciously clean moral vision, in which right and wrong are unambiguously opposed. The idea of tampering with the real through fictional means for the purpose of a social message evokes a problematic, philosophical question regarding the relationship between reality and fiction: most significantly, whether there is, in fact, a pure 'real', untainted by fictional imaginings, to represent. In considering these acts of renovation, I hope to expose the spaces of metaphorical translation between normative reality and imaginative revision and perceive, through these particular changes, exaggerations and transmutations, the society that conceives and reflects them.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, which opens with an excerpt from Sylvia Plath's journal, is a mirror held up specifically for women, as are many fairy tales, a genre imbued with a feminine face. "Fairy tales," Bernheimer writes, "are full of women looking at themselves" (xviii). Often featuring a female protagonist, fairy tales follow the female's search for self and her adventurous attempts to fit into or design her own social context. Recently, on the sitcom, *Sex and the City*, a modern, sexed-up fairy tale that features four thirty-year old single women searching for Mr. Right (and themselves), the introspective journalist (played by a Hollywood actress who is currently featured on magazine covers and touted as the modern Cinderella) wonders if women, innately, want to be rescued. She immediately relates this notion of rescue to the fairy tale, wondering what Snow White would have done if her prince in shining armour and white horse had not arrived, if she would have remained incased in glass or if she would have decided to wake up, focus on her own career, apply for an amex card, and investigate in-vitro fertilization. Or, do women really want to be rescued? The half hour ends as most

sitcoms do -- ending, not necessarily happily, but ending as no day in ordinary life ever does. The lead character misses the ferry back to the 'real' world of Manhattan from Staten Island, loses her pink sequin shoe (an adaptation of the glass slipper), but only briefly, because as she turns around the politician in the black BMW with heated seats, not quite prince charming but close enough, pulls up for the rescue. The sitcom ends with a modern sense of fantasy that is fleeting and marred with imperfections, and yet, nonetheless, appealing.

However, by focusing on female identity, I do not intend to suggest that the fairy tale genre is entirely preoccupied with aspects of femininity. In fact, the genre is often related to quest narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which feature boys and their adventures of self-discovery. It is necessary to remember that male identities are also captured and manipulated within the psychological walls of the fairy tale. However, while this project will consider the male elements in Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion*, it will remain focused on the female body and psyche as portrayed and reconceived through the fictional lens of the fairy tale.

Unfortunately, the traditional fairy tale is tainted by misperceptions (the backlash of an ironic and cynical age) that have succeeded in colouring the entire genre an antifeminist pink -- full of pretty, passive things. Yet fairy tales are not merely a series of what Plath sees as "smooth strawberry and cream Mother-Goose-Worlds, Alice-in-Wonderlands," featuring silk and sequined women waiting to be kissed (Bernheimer viii). The history of the fairy tale offers a diversity of female characters from the evil queen to the ugly stepsister that provides challenges to and mirrors of women's complex

conceptions of themselves. Instead of dismissing the genre as “antiwoman,” Bernheimer believes that we must consider its “oddly multiplicitous twists,” by which I assume that she means the various ways that fictional plots, characters and symbols can be “twisted” or translated (xx). Although fairy tales appear to offer easily identifiable, formulaic characters, it does not follow that the fairy tale itself is single-minded; rather it is reduced by our same approach. Bernheimer asks whether a “female suicide in the Yiddish tale, *The Penitent and the Rebbe of Tshekhenove* -- and her subsequent resurrection as a sexual object after her death -- signifies man’s power over women? Or women’s power over men?” (xxi). At least in part, perspective determines the nature of the symbolism.

Writing in the 1950s, a period partly shaped by sexual repression, Sylvia Plath views the fairy tale genre with contempt; for her it is an instructional medium that conditions children to believe in what does not exist. This passage from Plath’s journal, which appears in the preface to Bernheimer’s text, is permeated with a resentful tone and vilifies the fairy tale as a genre of lies that sequesters children in a world of illusion, the foundations of which inevitably self-destruct:

After being conditioned as a child to the lovely never-never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens...of the magic wand, and the faultless illustrations—the beautiful dark-haired child (who was you)...walking barefoot...in the flower garden with the slim-limbed flower spirits...all this I knew, and felt, and believed. All this was my life when I was young. To go from this to the world of ‘grown-up’ reality...to feel the sex-organs develop and call loud to the flesh...marriage, sex, compatibility, war, economics, death and self. What a pathetic blighting of the beauty and reality of childhood. Not to be sentimental, as I sound, but why the hell are we conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose world, Alice-in-Wonderland fable, only to be broken...and become aware of ourselves as individuals with a dull responsibility in life? To learn snide and smutty meanings of words you once loved, like ‘fairy.’ (qtd. in Bernheimer viii)

Disturbingly, this excerpt suggests a dichotomy between the innocence of fantasy and the seemingly perverse development of the body, aligning the fairy tale with an erroneous sense of self -- a bodiless self, distanced from the social complexities of sex and gender. Such uneasiness about the sexual body recurs in Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). As Elaine Showalter notes, Plath's fractured heroine, Esther Greenwood bears marks of Plath's autobiography. The title of the novel, *The Bell Jar*, invokes an image of "a cylindrical glass vessel with a rounded top and an open base used to protect and display fragile objects or to establish a controlled atmosphere or environment in scientific experiments," symbolizing the female experience (Rattray 167). As an exceptional student and aspiring poet, Esther feels displaced among the sexual sophisticates, prom queens, and prospective, defeated and servile housewives who are her fellow editors. Yet "none of the alternatives available to educated women are satisfactory" (Showalter 216), perhaps because they are so contrived (each one forced to relinquish a fundamental aspect of her feminine identity in order to 'fit' into a designated role). Career women, like the editor-in-chief or the professors at Esther's college are curiously sexless and have, it seems, sacrificed their female bodies in order to acquire the masculine traits of rationality and strength. Here, Plath demonstrates the problem with the female subject. The problem is embedded in dichotomous conceptions that extend backwards through this 1950's context -- that is characterized by Adlai Stevenson's speech at Plath's 1955 graduation at which she instructed her classmates to write "'laundry lists'" rather than poems -- into the post-Romantic period of Sara Coleridge for whom motherhood and writing were also incompatible (Showalter 216). We confront the messy problem (complicated by the

associated concerns of morality and control) of female sexuality and the body, which must be dealt with antiseptically -- the mind and body held apart, as if conjoined they might trigger a toxic contamination. It could be argued that fairy tales perpetuate this dichotomy by problematically portraying the body in either clean, idealistic terms, through the use of gendered, but weightless, mystical beings (fairies, sprites and nymphs), or by transmogrifying the human body into wicked step-sisters and loathsome beings. However, it could also be argued that fairy tales, much as they are escapist fantasies, are revolutionary media through which women are able to resist and reconfigure their normative identities, unencumbered by the body.

Dichotomous perceptions both restrict and enable. Although fairyland is built according to a normative, organizational strategy that erects a dichotomous structure of supports (male/female, ugly/beautiful, poor/wealthy, ordinary/unique, evil/good...), it also questions and sometimes dissolves oppositions. Barbara Garlick argues in "Christina Rossetti and the Gender Politics of Fantasy" that by the middle of the nineteenth century

disquieting aspects of much earlier fantasy had become tamed through familiarity, and the discourse of faery insidiously abetted the prevailing Victorian ideologies, particularly in regard to the position of women, rather than fulfilling any subversive function which twentieth century critics commonly ascribe to fantasy. (Garlick 133)

However, rather than dismissing the genre as subservient, using words like "tamed" and "abetted" to describe both the genre and the Victorian female writer, it would be more reasonable to consider the climate in which these female writers worked. Through the lens of a twentieth-century feminist perspective, conservative women like Sara Coleridge

appear not only to submit to patriarchal conceptions, but also to propagate them. Yet this is to simplify. Garlick is right, on some level, to be wary of the modern tendency to ascribe a subversive function to feminine writing of this period (and I will heed her advice). However, perhaps there is a compromise here -- a compromise that this project will attempt to consider. The fairy tale genre, whether it be characterized by its maternal quality or, conversely, by its resonance of feminine 'evil' (a trait that the genre was assigned in the last quarter of the century as the voice of the 'new woman' became more insistent), is prone to reproducing normative Victorian ideologies because it was the medium made available to the conservative female writers of the period (Garlick 133). To limit the use of this medium undermines the impact of the domesticated, female writer; there is a need to redefine the subversive, to reconsider it outside its extremist connotations. In analyzing Sara Coleridge's fairy tale, I hope to demonstrate a less obvious sense of the subversive, which works from 'within' -- commenting, redesigning and questioning.

There is an anarchistic element in this fantastical genre; it involves an extension of boundaries and a lyrical language, which is perhaps erroneously associated with a sense of femininity (an irrational simplicity or mystical wisdom). Kate Bernheimer warns that the "question of how fairy tales impact women's ways of thinking about femininity, emotion and the self [should] not herald nostalgically the myth that little girls like dolls and fairies [but neither should it] reject categorically that possibility" (xx). Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), in discussing fairy tales there is no escaping these kinds of connotations, stereotypes and normative conceptions. In fact, the genre is

steeped in them -- a quality that offers us insight into the construction and adaptation of social identities. Yet, we cannot dismiss the limiting nature of artificial dichotomies; lines and categories cause us to move away from the mess, or web, the central metaphor of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72), that reflects both the dynamics of her novel and her function as writer. "As historian, observer and analyst" her task is to "unravel certain human lots, [to see] how they [are] woven and interwoven" (Eliot xxi). Although it was Eliot's intention to remain close to the texture of life, to use fiction as a reflective rather than distorting lens, her novel shares an affinity with fantasy; both are composed of designed excess, a psychical excess that reminds us of our humanity (although in different ways) so that we may "find ourselves imaginatively implicated [in the] egotism, selfishness, weakness and petty dishonesties" of her characters who are shaped by the flux and influxes of societal change (Eliot x). Stephen Prickett argues in his essay on the distinction between 'realism' and 'fantasy' that in George MacDonald's work "the so-called 'realistic' novels were designed to subvert and alter our sense of reality" but that this is "no less true of the so-called fantasy novel" (Prickett 88). Realist novelists, such as Eliot and MacDonald, investigate human interaction, etiquette and character, using settings in which readers may easily include themselves and, therefore, realize themselves to be active, guilty participants in what is a demonstration of immoral human behaviour. The props and costumes that realist and fantastical genres use are merely different; one employs the 'familiar' scenes of dinner parties and family disputes and the other, exotic geographical locations and bizarre, personified creatures. Yet they both engage in similar, subtle, revolutionary acts; they instigate reaction by revealing the

madness, absurdity and malevolence in the world. We should shrink the space, which we have forged, between realist and fantasist texts and realize that their mediums of expression, although different, are similar in purpose.

Fairy tales work at peeling back the veneers of power, class and beauty to expose corruption and duplicity and reveal that things are never quite as they seem (and that they can do this *because* they work within conventional ideas of identity). This is the revolutionary power of fairy tales -- the power of reconsidering, repositioning and ‘play,’ a power extended to them through connections to their historical contexts. Conversation is an integral part of fantasy; there must be, on the other side of it, the not quite separate voice of the real -- a conversation between the real and the unreal, which Charles Dickens symbolizes in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) in the “great looking-glass about the sideboard [that] reflects the table and the company” (Jasper xi). David Jasper reminds us in his essay about words and fantasy that “literature, and not least fantasy literature, is...given to making words mean a great deal, not severing them from communal usage, but certainly intensifying and even transforming ordinary language” (Jasper xii). The image of the mirror will occur throughout this discussion of the fairy tale; it is one that can be traced through many Victorian works of fantasy. Mirrors insinuate a reversal -- a perspective that can manifest a beyond. Fantasy literature is marked by images of dream and reflection, such as the “rabbit-hole” and “looking-glass” in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). It is written in the

tradition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [who strove] to perceive and communicate a reality through the contemporary experience of nineteenth century England. Down rabbit-holes, in medieval quest-lands, in utopia – [fantasists] were serious

writers, with social and political concerns, often dark visions, but who also possessed a sense of wonder, renewal and hope about what could be. (Jasper xii)

The woman writer, then, does not work outside the limits of her cultural, sexual, political boundaries, but rather, necessarily, inside them. Discussing George Eliot's rejection of "solid subjectivity," Isobel Armstrong considers the process, the "phantasmal flux of moments," in which "the self is made by culture, memory and myth, the memory of myth and the myth of memory," a process in which words shape subjectivity (Armstrong 371). This process involves 'phantasm,' not merely in the negative sense that the word refers to "a product of fantasy [or] a delusive appearance" (Mish 870). Additionally, phantasm involves imaginative activity, "a mental representation of a real object" (Mish 870). Fantasy is associated with sensibility, a word used to describe the period of pre-Romanticism, but which also indicates an early eighteenth-century reaction to the practical, materialist philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, which promotes an idealistic, spiritual alternative, based on personal feeling. However, the fairy tale, as explored in this study, is not strictly a product of sensibility, which would associate the genre with the "anti-materialist impulse to denigrate history and social context" (Ward 213). Although there is an element in the genre that abandons the physicalities with which materialism is concerned, the genre's idealism is tied to the related ideology of cultural materialism and Marxism which suggests that "political and social change [and subversive acts within fictional texts] are triggered by change in the material and economic basis of society" -- a phenomenon I will consider in the ensuing chapters, which briefly discuss the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ward 169).

Further exploration of the root word, 'phan' helps us to understand the term Phantasmagoria, which pertains to a "an exhibition or display of optical effects and illusions; a constantly shifting complex succession of things seen or imagined; a scene that constantly changes; a bizarre or fantastic combination, collection or assemblage," which could be considered examples of the "phenomena and processes" that are explicable only by "reference to physical matter" that Materialists consider the only 'real' thing (Mish 870). The perpetual movement, which characterizes both materialism and phantasmagoria, is an oscillation between reality and illusion, a creative action, which fuses the real and the unreal and, in mixing, re-forms 'actuality'. Feminine voices are not distant, musical strands but rather a multifarious voice produced inside the metaphorical 'prison' from which the female subject seeks to escape, subvert or, at least, renovate.

After establishing a modern context for the fairy tale and discussing some Romantic and Victorian ideologies of fantasy, it is now appropriate to discuss the patriarchal circle of the Romantic period, in relation to which we may then consider a feminine Romanticism. The Romantics, the six major (male) poets of the period rejected, in different ways, the rigid social and literary hierarchy of the eighteenth century.

Blake was morally indignant about the institutions of State and Church. Wordsworth and Coleridge began their careers as fervent proponents of social revolution, while the second generation Romantics, Byron, Shelley and (less prominently) Keats, remained true to the original revolutionary spirit through the succeeding period of reaction. (Ward 205)

Their emotional response to rational classicism, which sprung from a surging criticism, attacked the bourgeois complacency of the earlier period. It revived the need for fantasy, an innately human quality, which despite being sometimes characterized as escapism

possesses a sense of wit and activism. Accompanying this resurgent interest in the imagination was an interest in nature, an integral element in the fairy tale genre. However, nature ceased to be an “objective, intellectual concept” and became instead an “elusive metaphor” used to express human subjectivity and identity, perpetually shifting conceptions or experiences (Ward 206). Geoff Ward, the editor of the *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature: Romantic Literature from 1790-1830*, adds, what is perhaps a qualification, to the end of his note on ‘Romanticism’ that this term “embodies large simplifications. If it is used without a sense of the historical complexities which lie behind it, it can distort the literature to which it refers, rather than illuminating it” (Ward 206). This is a premise of my project which works to uncover slivers of feminine Romanticism, and more importantly, Sara Coleridge and her fairy tale (neither of which have a place in Ward’s ‘guide’), and, therefore, to also extend and deepen our understanding of what has been traditionally considered ‘Romanticism.’

Characterized by uncertainty, this period of societal introspection impelled Sara Coleridge’s father and other estranged poets to banish themselves to the far reaches of the imagination, so as to rediscover and redesign their sense of humanity and themselves. In his essay, *Foreward: Making Words Mean a Great Deal*, David Jasper writes, “S.T. Coleridge is, perhaps, the greatest theorist in English literature. Seminal for the nineteenth century in so many ways -- as philosopher, poet, theologian, critic -- he was described by J.S. Mill as the ‘great questioner of things established.’” (Jasper ix). Flogged for daydreaming and lethargy in his youth, Coleridge was humiliated by educators who could not fit him into their normative conceptions of masculine behaviour.

Kathleen Jones notes that he would escape to the roof and look at the “sky, dreaming of other landscapes, ‘for cloister’d in a city School/The Sky was all [he] knew of Beautiful’” (Jones 12). A symbolic location for escapist imaginings, the roof setting is an appropriate setting for fantasy. Conceived as lying behind the real, fantasy is grounded in and the product of social constructs and so, while the real may provide fantasy’s motivation for escape, it is also its unavoidable context. This creates the crisis of the dreamer.

Virginia Woolf refers to both Coleridge and his daughter as “heaven-haunters.” Sara remarked that her ““father generally discoursed on such a very extensive scale..., Henry could sometimes bring him down to narrower topics, but when alone with me he was almost always on the star-paved road, taking in the whole heavens in his circuit”” (Woolf 75). Although distanced in ‘real’ life by her father’s lack of paternal responsibility and by his critical tendencies, they nevertheless spoke the same language; however, Sara, assigned to the role of caretaker, was always somewhat more grounded in the practicalities, which her father ignored. When he would talk she would travel with him on that “star-paved road” but her mind wandered: ““I was anxious about my brothers and their prospects -- about Henry’s health, and upon the subject of my engagement generally”” (Woolf 75). Sara Coleridge’s father resisted the practicality of life. He was disillusioned by university life, unable to conform or to integrate his dissenting nature into a conventional military, ecclesiastical or scholastic career and tormented by the problem of maintaining his imagination amid the stagnancy of ‘normal’ life, and later unable to live within the constraints of marriage and family life. His unstable nature was criticized by conservative thinkers who considered him a disreputable and irresponsible

man. Coleridge sought refuge in the fictional landscapes of his ideas, in the truth of beauty, in the Keatsian idea that, “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’; [and] ‘that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’” (Keats 1060).

Somewhere in Coleridge’s metaphysical and philosophical discussions with Robert Southey whom he met during a visit to Oxford, and who would become a kind of surrogate father to Sara Coleridge, the concept of Pantisocracy was conceived. It was as much an idea as it was a possible location -- a utopian space which he aspired to create in the real world, in that quintessential land of dreams, America. Originating from the Greek term, “pan-socratia” (all-governing society), Pantisocracy involves desires for a harmonious existence with the natural world and a democratic, virtuous society, unfettered by the complexities of political hierarchy and untainted by human weakness. As Coleridge explains:

The Leading Idea of Pantisocracy is to make men necessarily virtuous by removing all Motives to Evil -- all possible Temptations...It is each Individual’s duty to be Just, because it is in his Interest...The Heart should have fed upon the truth, as Insects on a Leaf -- till it be tinged with the colour, and show its food in even the minutest fibre. (Jones 14)

Coleridge was said to persuasively present his ideas in a voice “above singing,” as does Sara Coleridge in *Phantasmion* which oscillates between prose and poetry, movements that suggest a desire to extend beyond linguistic boundaries, a reaching into something else (Jones 15). The lyrical nature of these imaginings reflects the drama that was an essential part of the act of Pantisocracy which was, Kathleen Jones suggests, a mere performance for Coleridge; the notion of a utopian society was “more of a flight of fancy than a practical reality,” a trying on of other possibilities, which involved the elaborate

props of adjectives and tone of voice (Jones 16). Although he believed in the ideal, Coleridge was weighed down by scepticism, the necessary 'other' of fantasy, and it restrained him from wholly relinquishing himself to what his publisher, Cottle, referred to as "an epidemic delusion" and to what Southey quite differently considered "a passionately longed-for reality, an escape" (Jones 16). The extent to which Pantisocracy epitomizes the 'impossible dream' is evident in the way that Southey imagines himself at once "sawing down a tree" and "discussing metaphysics," "criticizing poetry" while "hunting a buffalo" and "writing sonnets whilst following the plough" (Jones 16). These are idealized moments in which the mind and body are united in what was to his generation and what continues to be a coveted state of balance. These imagined moments of epiphany, inspired by physical engagement with nature, are miraculous feats that disregard the experience of the body and reveal the struggles of the fantasist.

In *A Passionate Sisterhood* (1997), Kathleen Jones discusses these moments of unreality, particularly the ones in which numerous, overlapping chores are designated to the at once "beautiful, amiable and accomplished" women of the society (Jones 16). Pantisocracy resembles Platonic idealism in that it believes human life should emulate an "eternal world of ideal forms," which reflects the Romantic desire to consider reality in terms of an original order. The notion of a naturally occurring foundation or community weakens the legitimacy of the social structure and undermines the fixity of the hierarchical political and fiscal systems, which the group sought to undermine (Ward 192). Yet the idea that reality is alterable is at odds with the concept of idealism, which suggests solidity; unable to acquire the 'natural ground,' Pantisocracy and its

'perfectness' remained a perpetual performance for Coleridge and the epitome of the bourgeois dream. Writing in contradictions, Samuel Taylor Coleridge explains that, "in its most perfect Sense" (a disoriented, perfectionist sense), "pantisocracy is practicable." Practicable in theory, the community is impeccably organized to exist as an efficient system -- a "polished order" which resembles, coincidentally, the smooth façade of a 'green canopied and pink butterflies' fairy tale (Jones 15).

Ironically, Coleridge was creating an ordered system, not unlike the one from which he sought refuge, characterized by a sense of inflexibility yet not in the normative, conservative sense. Hinging on the manifestation of a contradictory notion of human perfectionism, Pantisocracy proposed the construction of a utopian, communistic existence on the banks of America's Susquehanna River. In Coleridge's mind, perhaps, the geographic location of this proposed community resembled the exotic, primal landscape of "Kubla Khan" which possesses a hallucinatory quality, consistent with the effects of opium use, an alternative form of escape for Coleridge, an addiction later shared by his daughter Sara who, "suffering from depression and severe anxiety, found relief in writing and opium" (Robinson 116). Yet David Jasper insists that "The Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan" and "Christabel" are "no mere opium-dreams, but the prelude to the dark, obsessive, rich world of the Victorian imagination and fantasy," an imagination manifested in his daughter's fairy tale (Jasper ix). A "paradise," "Kubla Khan" features a "stately pleasure dome;" built on the banks of the Alph, the river of life or creativity, the dome is a precarious construct which juxtaposed with the "lifeless ocean" of stagnant conformity, symbolizes creative balance. A metaphor for Coleridge's own life, the dome

stands amid a “deep romantic chasm...with ceaseless turmoil seething” (Wu 514-515). Suspended in the in-between, on the border between the real and the imaginary, Coleridge was often unable to live as a financially independent poet and instead relied on charity -- the precarious “pleasure dome.” Sometimes considered “spongers” and “gypsies,” Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were able to sustain themselves on charitable annuities, but lived in a way that caused them to feel the effects of social judgment and also, perhaps, the impossibility of the bourgeois dream (Jones xiv). As a result, Coleridge would often bury himself in a delirium of ideas and opium, a “madness” he describes as “illegible,” a “labyrinth” in which he often got lost, a “trackless wilderness;” these spaces which he tried to fill with utopian poetry and ideologies, could at last be legible, organized and sustainable, if only imaginatively (Jones 13).

Continually having to locate himself somewhere between his disengaged condition and the phenomena of the imagination, Coleridge wrote *Biographia Literaria* (1817), a miscellaneous work of autobiography, philosophy and literary criticism, later edited by his daughter Sara, which features a psychological approach to creativity. In the *Biographia* Coleridge defines Primary imagination as a “living power and prime agent of all human perception” in comparison to Secondary imagination, which he perceives as the “creative power that synthesizes and re-expresses experience in new forms” (117). Endowing the imagination with a sense of dissidence, Coleridge describes this “essentially vital” element of the imagination emphatically and with a repetitive use of verbs. “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates,” he writes, “in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to

unify,” acts which resemble the questioning, but also smoothly assembled, nature of fantasy (118).

Contemplating Christina Rossetti’s experiences in writing children’s literature, Armstrong suggests that many Victorian women -- including Sara Coleridge -- turned to children’s literature because “childhood is one of the times when a play with limit is permissible.” Childhood and children’s literature are also accessible spaces for women of that era (Armstrong 366). Sara reveals in a letter that female writers were not merely constrained by feminine style and modest tone but also by subject matter; “politics and history are subjects on which I have less of my desultory feminine sort of information than some others which seem rather more within my compass” (*Memoir and Letters* 45). This image of a “compass” is intriguing because it evokes the impression of circularity, a circularity, which bearing an enclosing line or boundary, both constrains and frees, within a particular space.

Feminine Romanticism could be perceived as a circle either inside or outside the circle of patriarchal Romantic literature, both sharing a common “central anchor or pivot about which the drawing arm is turned” (Mish 358). “Divinity,” Sara Coleridge writes, “may be as wide a field as politics; but is not so far out of a woman’s way...” (*Memoir and Letters* 45). There is no contesting that Sara Coleridge felt constrained, because she was a woman, from thinking outside her limited, feminine circle of thought and from participating in the ‘masculine’ conversations of politics and history. Yet, Sara Coleridge discusses fundamental metaphysical questions within the juvenile, highly fictitious context of fairyland (Armstrong 367). While there are particular traits of Sara

Coleridge's writing that place her within patriarchal Romanticism, her fairy tale is distinctly feminine. She uses the traditional genre of the fairy tale, with its emphasis on nature and binary conceptions, and the conventional boy hero. However, by incorporating several female characters, she feminizes her story, presenting a multifaceted depiction of the female subject who is capable of transforming the normative definitions of femininity. In fact, Sara Coleridge's constant focus on female characters such as the peculiar, androgynous figure, Malderyl, the three slim damsels, Iarine, Leucoia and Zelneth, and a host of organic, bodiless fairies and nymphs, some benevolent and ineffectual, others proficient, redefine the fairy tale as a genre for women, which communicates the female quest for identity. The male hero, Phantasmion, is the title character; yet, he is supported and shaped by the maternal figure of Pontentilla who possesses the ability to educate and initiate change. Additionally, she redefines feminine beauty as an empowering force that is not superficial but innate and profound. In using the traditional context of fairyland to investigate alternative conceptions of gender and identity, Sara Coleridge reveals a unique kind of female writer who is paradoxically compliant and subversive.

Armstrong explains the position that the female subject has within society.

Women are like the poet of sensation, subversively attacking entrenched, habitual opinion by dissolving and re-forming associative patterns. Thus they are the real agents of cultural transformation through the imagination. They are at work in the semiotic code, as Kristeva puts it. (Armstrong 36-37)

Perhaps magic does exist after all in the form of an entourage of sensation-yielding female writers. Yet "dissolving and reforming" is not so much magic, as a side effect of, or imaginative response to, the real. Secondary imagination, as described in *Biographia*

Literaria, is not a detached phenomena but rather an “echo” of the primary imagination, which is the “living power and prime agent of all human perception.” So, the secondary imagination is like an “echo,” something that comes back from that which has been perceived, a response. Not a passive effect of sound, the “echo,” instead, suggests an instinctual, critical reaction which distorts the original (Wu 574). Composed of reverberations, the imagination is, ironically, the least magical thing. It is, instead, a reactionary faculty which, cloaked in the magic of rhyme and glitter, manifests itself in the genre of the fairytale (where play is permissible). For Sara Coleridge who struggled, like the other women of the *Passionate Sisterhood*, to live within the cloistered space of nineteenth-century feminine identity, the fairytale, although on some level an “escapist fantasy,” supplied a metaphorical medium, through which she could resist, reconfigure and ‘play’ with the female subject (Jones 251). This thesis, then, grapples with the genre of fantasy in an attempt to counter the criticism that dismisses its literary relevance.

Perhaps David Jasper wrestles with it best when he writes:

Fantasy may be simply an escape from the pressures of such a time knowing itself to be the best and worst, or it may be the expression of a sense of the real which is often almost lost in a kaleidoscopic progress too fast to be assimilated into the senses of the individual or society. (Jasper ix)

So, engaging with this “kaleidoscopic progress,” I will discuss Sara Coleridge and devise a strategy for recovering the Romantic female subject from those who have turned her into a toad.

CHAPTER 1

INTERPRETING *PHANTASMION*

Because the soul is progressive,
it never quite repeats itself,
but in every act attempts the production
of a new and fairer whole.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "On Art"

"Like her father," Virginia Woolf writes, "she had a Surinam toad in her head, breeding other toads. But his were jeweled; hers were plain" (Woolf 45). Caught behind the image of a self-effacing, dutiful child who committed herself to editing and rehabilitating her famous father's works, Sara Coleridge remains a mostly unexamined literary figure, even by her principle biographer, Earle Leslie Griggs who, in *Coleridge Fille* (1940), patronizes her on the grounds of her gender. Impaired by a "feminine bias," her thoughts are for Griggs "too casual to be fitted into a system" (Griggs 106). For Griggs, then, she exists outside a system, yet within it, in that she is evaluated and defined by its 'unbiased,' masculine logic. Ostracized, Sara Coleridge is perceived in relation to the system that diminishes her identity. Therefore, she is not recognized as a whole subject, but rather as an addendum to both her father and Romanticism. Yet to argue, as Griggs and Henry Reed do, that she does not fit into the literary system because she is female and that she is, therefore, predisposed to an illogical perspective, is to expose the contrived and self-righteous nature of such a system. More recent studies have continued to perceive Sara Coleridge in this way though to characterize her as a

writer who participated in a “feminine Romanticism,” distinct from the mainstream movement prominently associated with her father (Robinson 119). The following section of my discussion builds on this revised view by focusing on the female imagination as a domain outside, yet inscribed by, the social system. It is from this perspective, using the lens of her imaginative creations, that I will base my analysis, looking, if you will, from the inside out.

Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion* is punctuated by lyrical poems that capture the Romantic legacy of disillusion, want of fantasy and search for truth in beauty. They are interpolations that reveal Sara Coleridge’s use of synaesthesia, a characteristic of her father’s poetry, which “evokes a world of passions, dreams, and the imagination” (Robinson 118). For Kathleen Jones, Sara’s fairy tale portrays a world in which the “sick are miraculously healed, lovers live happily ever after and dreams come true” (Jones 251). Jones offers, here, a typical, reductionist perception of the genre.

Even in a supportive preface to the 1874 edition of *Phantasmion*, John Duke Coleridge admits that his supportive remarks may be perceived as “exaggerated language” used to describe “nothing but a fairy tale” and that *Phantasmion* may be considered by some as “an example of a kind of composition old-fashioned, out of date, and entirely at odds with the spirit and temper of the time we live in” (*Phantasmion* iv). At odds it was with the first industrial revolution of the modern world, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and especially between 1750 and 1850, transformed England from a predominantly rural and agricultural country into a predominantly industrial society (Ward 147). However, as John Coleridge argues in the preface, the

urbanization of England brought with it a need to combat the “grim and unlovely lives, which the great body of the English people is doomed to lead, their dreary toil, their dull homes, their harsh surroundings...to mercifully give them glimpses of things more beautiful” (*Phantasmion* v-vi). This argument, which explains the human need to fantasize and our tendency to either resent the unreal or allow it to intoxicate or delude us, would support critics who argue that the fairy tale is essentially escapist literature. Yet, perhaps, the fairy tale is not so much about escape as it is about survival. Musings of fantasy and fiction, which are intrinsically subversive, are at risk of being thwarted by the age of realism, of industry and smoke.

Perhaps it is not so much that the fairy tale genre itself was unpopular, but that the sheer size of *Phantasmion*, well over three hundred pages in length, and printed without accompanying illustrations, is so unapproachable. The bland cover and lack of pictorial enhancements conceal, not ‘merely’ a story of fantasy, but rather a profusion of imagery and poetic tone. The *Quarterly Review*’s critic wrote that, though not a poem, *Phantasmion* “is poetry from beginning to end”; it was, the reviewer observed, the last fairytale for adults “ever to be written in England” (Jones 251). Although fantasy survived in the literary culture (especially in the work of Charles Dickens who was “one of the greatest Victorian fantasists...as he forever delves beneath the surface of industrial England to the ‘deep structures’ of consciousness and intersubjectivity”), the fairy tale, considered a nonsensical and unserious genre in the post-Romantic period, would soon be exiled to books for children (Jasper x). Curiously, Sara Coleridge appeared, in advance, to understand that writing a fairy tale was “the very way to be *not read*, but shoved aside

with contempt” (*Memoir and Letters* 135), a comment that reveals a tenacity to disseminate her ideologies (not moral scriptures, but rather unforced imaginings, subtle truths that appear to stem from the natural world of the Romantic poet) and challenge the normative view of a genre that she, as well as her father, Scott and Lamb believed “beneficial to the development of the intellect and imagination” (Robinson 118).

In 1924, Mona Wilson wrote of Sara’s accounts of death and insanity in *Phantasmion* that “the imaginative child will find this book a better preparation for life than a simpler story with a direct moral purpose” (Wilson 222-23). This focus on imagination corresponds with Sara’s intentions, which she declares, lyrically, in “L’Envoy of *Phantasmion*.”

Go, little book, and sing of love and beauty,
 To tempt the wordling into fairy land;
 Tell him that airy dreams are sacred duty,
 Bring better wealth than aught his toils command --
 Toils fraught with mickle harm.
 But if thou meet some spirit high and tender,
 On blessed works and noblest love intent,
 Tell him that airy dreams of nature’s splendor,
 With graver thoughts and hallowed musings blent,
 Prove no too earthly charm. (*Phantasmion* x)

Carl Woodring describes Sara’s poetical messages in this way: “imagination, not moral precept, brings growth. Wordlings [social creatures, which here possess a perversity, as though distorted] can escape the ‘mickle harm’ of worldly toil by avoiding cautionary moral tales and performing the sacred duty of escape into airy dreams” (Woodring 219). The ability to imagine, although in some form available to everyone, is a spiritual experience for Sara, equivalent to a religious activity facilitated by “poetic priests,” which supplies the mind, dulled and regimented by moral conditioning, with a sense of

enlightenment (Mudge 79). Her quasi-religious language may confuse the difference she assigns poetry and religion; poetry lacks the severity of dogmatic religion and yet the comparison offers imagination a sense of seriousness that it might otherwise be considered to lack. Imagining, despite Woodring's repetitive use of 'escape,' is not a frivolous activity for Sara, but rather a "sacred duty" -- a religious act through which we may remain children, "trailing clouds of glory," still able to "see into the life of things" (qtd. in Wu 241). Her "little book" is a kind of Bible used to maintain this sense of clarity and to promote the growth of the imagination. She writes in a letter dated October 18, 1841 that "there is a great coolness about the minds" that have "no vividness or activity of imagination; things are not multiplied, heightened, and deepened to them by this mirror in the back part of the mind" (*Memoir and Letters* 182). This image of the imagination as a mirror located in the back of the mind is a reoccurring symbol in the writings of Sara Coleridge.

Revealing the reflective qualities of the imaginative faculty, as outlined in *Biographia Literaria*, the symbol of the mirror challenges the idea of a passive intellect, which regurgitates information and instead suggests a sense of a 'working' and turning around of things. Sara concludes, reflecting on old Fisher of Borodale's observation "a great deal of religion requires a great deal of looking after," "so we may say of imagination" (*Memoir and Letters* 182). Just as Sara warns against the lack of "vividness or activity," she believes that "the more [imagination] a man has, the more sense and firmness he needs to keep it in order" -- a rarely achieved balance. She writes that "an

excitable imagination, united with a weak intellect and a want of force of character, is a plague both to the possessor and his friends" (*Memoir and Letters* 182).

This plague not only affected male Romanticists but also threatened female writers such as Elizabeth Barrett who was, according to Sara, particularly susceptible. Her perplexingly derogatory impression of female writers seems to be inspired by her rule of invisibility. She was abrasively critical of Elizabeth Barrett's poems, which she reduced to "undisciplined power," "affectation and bombast," criticism inspired by what Sara considered pretentiousness (*Memoir and Letters* 516). For Sara, Barrett's work was audacious because it was conspicuous. Once again, it is revealing to notice the kind of language that Sara Coleridge employs when discussing literature by women. In suggesting that Barrett's poetry demonstrates "undisciplined power" she insinuates that literary power, as used by women, should somehow be restrained or muffled. In a section of her *Memoirs*, entitled "Women's Novels," Sara admits that Elizabeth Barrett has "more poetic genius than any other woman living -- perhaps more than any woman ever showed before, except Sappho" and yet she qualifies her sense of Barrett's genius. "Still there is an imperfectness in what she produces; in many passages the expressions are very faulty, the images forced and untrue, the sentiments exaggerated" (*Memoir and Letters* 516). Sara Coleridge's adjectives reveal her sense of a messy and 'unnatural' female poet, at odds with the notion of the ideal woman, the closest available persona to masculinity, which Sara sought to achieve through the 'straightening' process of education. What is most difficult to understand from a contemporary feminist perspective is Sara Coleridge's sexist belief that Barrett's critical acclaim was not due to

her poetical work but to her gender. Were her writings from the hand of a man, Sara wrote,

they would be set down as unsuccessful productions exhibiting some portion of poetic power and merit and never have made the tenth part of the noise which as the poems of Miss Barrett they have created. Epics and Lyrics and Dramatics of female authors at most are but splendid failures....(Jones 262)

Curiously, she seems oblivious to the reality facing women writers of this period -- that femininity obstructed literary respect and publication (although, ironically, a femininity appropriated by male poets was revered). However, as new historicism reminds us, late twentieth-century feminism may make us overly critical of Romantic women writers such as Sara Coleridge, who attacked fellow female poets for their “falsetto muscularity” (Jones 262), and Anne Grant, who asserted that women were inferior to men; they were simply acceding to the normative opinions of their period (Ward 179). Sara’s derogatory remarks demonstrate how her ideas about ordering the imagination with “sense and firmness,” which she adopted from her father, cooperate with her cultural milieu, which associated ‘femininity’ with sentimental excess and ‘masculinity’ with rationality. Sara Coleridge’s cultivation techniques anticipate Bruno Bettelheim’s ideas about the psychological development of children and the role that fairy tales play in providing ordered, fictional environments and shaped, metaphorical characters who aid in organizing the developing imagination.

In the preface to the 1874 edition of *Phantasmion*, John Duke Coleridge writes, “*Phantasmion* does not pretend to teach directly any moral lesson; it is not a sermon in disguise; but most people will be better and happier while they read it, and after they have read it too” (*Phantasmion* vi). However, while Sara’s fairy tale is not “calculated,” a

complaint she made about many tales for children, neither is it a purely “descriptive piece,” void of philosophical teachings. Not a wholly allegorical or moral tale such as *The Faerie Queene* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Phantasmion* “does not belong to that class of fictions in which a single truth or moral is to be illustrated by a sequence of events...[and in which] the characters and descriptions are all for the sake of an allegory” (*Memoir and Letters* 146). The characters of *Phantasmion* are organic creatures as opposed to the blatantly, morally and socially inscribed characters of Paul Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; the jury that tries Pilgrim and his friend Faithful, is comprised of “Mr. Blindman, Mr. No-good, Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-Loose, Mr. Heady, Mr. Highmind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Cruelty, Mr. Hate-light, Mr. Implacable” (*Memoir and Letters* 146).

The difference in Sara’s writing style, which reveals a less rigid approach to moral dissemination, reflects her philosophies of change and movement that originate from her father’s work on imagination in *Biographia Literaria*. It was Sara’s hope that *Phantasmion* would help to “cultivate the imagination, and innocently gratify the curiosity of the reader, by exhibiting the general and abstract beauty of things through the vehicle of a story...the human hopes and fears and passions...” (*Memoir and Letters* 146-147). Sara continues, suggesting that “it may be a defect of *Phantasmion* that one thought is not as predominant throughout the narrative” and yet, if so, it is a defect of life itself (*Memoir and Letters* 146-147). Perhaps this is what Daniel Robinson means when he argues that *Phantasmion* is “ostensibly a fairy tale” (Robinson 11), because it reflects the mess of life as no other contrived and dichotomous construction of fancy does, and so

its “defect” then, is an effect of Sara’s refusal to reduce life to a single truth or moral (*Memoir and Letters* 146-147). But to say, as John Duke Coleridge does in his preface, that *Phantasmion* does not “disguise” moral sermons is to risk rendering the fairy tale hollow -- lacking philosophical content. If for D.H. Lawrence’s rocking-horse boy the “walls spoke endlessly of money,” for Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s daughter, Sara, the “walls spoke, often in verse, of endless learning” (Woodring 212). Expression and adventure took the form of learning in the enclosed space of Greta Hall. Education for Sara Coleridge would become an ingrained way of living, evident in her need to disseminate knowledge, a process that would also sustain her, and give her space, if only interior space.

However, while it reveals a sense of imaginative profusion, Sara Coleridge’s writing is also characterized by restraint, which she used subversively. Bradford Keyes Mudge argues in *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter* (a title that reveals the extent to which Sara Coleridge’s identity as addendum continues) that to publish a children’s fairy tale, as it is “the very way to be not read” (*Memoir and Letters* 146), is to remain silently beneath the guise of “female modesty” (Mudge 95). In writing about the crowd of “very tall, strong and striking” (*Memoir and Letters* 146) male writers, a passage that “brims with anger and resentment,” Sara reveals her desire to elude the pretense of feminine etiquette (Mudge 95). “Clearly,” Mudge writes, “Sara was not completely satisfied with her status as the anonymous author of a children’s book; perhaps she realized that *Phantasmion* was, beneath its generic trappings, itself a type of theology easily translatable into a more respected discourse” (Mudge 95). Mudge’s perspective is tainted

by the romantic notion of the female poet as the suppressed, subversive other, resigned to live in fairyland, the same kind of criticism offered by Virginia Woolf, who in perceiving Sara Coleridge as an “unfinished masterpiece,” failed to see the value of her existing creations (Woolf 17). This approach, which is essentially a game of ‘what ifs’ (what if she had written in a “more respected discourse”), appeals to those critics who want to ‘discover’ the mummified remnants of feminine genius (which should always manifest itself in a serious intellectual form, otherwise it is not recognizable), even if their criticism overlooks the integrity of particular historical contexts and neglects the genre of fantasy writing, thereby perpetuating the very misconceptions that Sara attempted to overcome.

The respectability, and even identity of a text was often determined by the gender of its author. Sara, herself, demonstrates after reading *Jane Eyre*, which was published under a male pseudonym, how the gender of an author can affect a response to a text. Convinced that a man had written the novel, Sara uses a distinctly masculine set of adjectives to describe its brilliance, as if its worth was directly related to the gender of its supposed author; it has “a spirit, a glow and fire about it, a masculine energy of satire and of picturesque description, which have delighted me” (*Memoir and Letters* 87). Sara’s response (which is highly ironic) drastically changes when she discovers Charlotte Bronte’s gender; her novels now “abound in proofs of a certain hardness of feeling and plebian coarseness of taste” (*Memoir and Letters* 87). Sara suggests that Charlotte has somehow betrayed her gender by assuming an unnatural “hardness” and “coarseness;” when translated into a masculine context, these criticisms turn into a “masculine energy

of satire". She uses the same type of language to criticize Elizabeth Barrett's poetry, which possesses a "rugged, harsh versification" -- "imperfect[ions]" that "obstruct" thought (*Memoir and Letters* 516). Women, it appears, cannot employ certain kinds of style, which have been designated for strictly masculine use.

Sara presents female poets as imposters who use words that do not belong to them; in their attempt to seem masculine, they "obstruct" their voices, which merely embarrasses. In an unpublished essay on Wordsworth's poem "Lines left on a Yew-tree Seat," Sara presents herself, not so much as an equal, but as a parishioner of Wordsworth's and reveals, indirectly, why she is uncomfortable with the notion of a female poet. She writes about the "philosophic nature of his poetry" and defends the notion of a universal language that speaks to all -- "men and women, rich and poor, educated and unlettered" yet, ironically, this language that speaks to all can only, it seems, be spoken by men. Despite the fact that Sara Coleridge adhered to gender binaries, Wordsworth criticized her moments of monopolistic and indelicate conversation, the effects of "bluestockingism," which he saw, "sadly at enmity with true refinement of mind" (Mudge 135). To be a poet is also to be a philosopher and to be a philosopher is to be a man (who is expected to be monopolistic and indelicate). I will indulge in speculation and suggest that, if written by a man, Sara Coleridge's fairytale may have been revered as a metaphysical masterpiece through which "the nature [and imagination] of man could be refined and glorified" (Mudge 80).

However, I will return to the issue of 'disguise' and Mudge's comment about *Phantasmion's* "generic trappings," which a reviewer for the *Quarterly Review* perceives

quite differently. For this particular reviewer, they possess a sense of originality, which Daniel Robinson cleverly terms, “generic hybridity” (Robinson 118). Rather than masks, these embellishments are an inextricable part of the truths that Sara Coleridge communicates and the acts of “cultivating, gratifying, and exhibiting” (*Memoir and Letters* 146). What Mudge fails to perceive about the passage in which Sara describes the “very tall, strong and striking” male members of the literary crowd is the way that Sara evokes a sense that social identities are removable and exchangeable -- that a “very tall, strong and striking” costume might gain her entrance into the esteemed, literary crowd and that her fairytale, if it too were to assume a more distinguished, ‘male’ form, would be taken more seriously (*Memoir and Letters* 146). However, although this can be a revealing way to think about female subjectivity and the issue of gender, we should avoid attempting to transmogrify the genre, to alter the integrity of the fairy tale by ‘cleaning off’ its artifice and excess of enchantment, and, instead, consider the genre with its supposedly ‘superfluous’ layers intact.

The enchanting surface of this fairy tale is in fact a fundamental aspect of design. Written for the amusement of her son, Herbert, *Phantasmion* was conceived as an educational tool, comparable to Sara’s earlier *Pretty Lessons for Good Children* (1834), which went through five editions in five years. Composed for her children, Herbert and Edith, Coleridge’s only volume of poetry reveals her genius and the resources of her cultivated imagination to make palpable simplistic lessons in Latin vocabulary, English history, world geography, the months of the years, and the days of the week (Robinson 116). Influenced by her father’s belief that “in the poetic symbol there is a real revelation,

for it embodies an ‘epiphany’ of eternal truths in finite form” (Prickett, 1979 8), Sara was keenly aware of fiction’s ability to facilitate wisdom and to develop intellectual and imaginative capacities; as a result, the dynamics of *Phantasmion* reflect this process. The title character of Sara’s fairy tale, Phantasmion, a boy whose imagination is in need of revival, represents what a reviewer for the *Quarterly Review* called the fairy tale itself; *Phantasmion* is “one of a race that has particularly suffered under the assaults of [masculine], political economy and useful knowledge” (Robinson 118). *Phantasmion*, then, as personified in its title character, is a symbol of fantasy, and demonstrates the need to cultivate the imagination, a facet of the mind that Samuel Taylor Coleridge considers to include, not oppose, reason. I will shift, momentarily, from my discussion of Sara Coleridge to her father, in an attempt to signify their intellectual connections. Subsequently, I will return to Sara Coleridge’s specific contributions to a feminine Romanticism. My criticisms of those who are unable to perceive her exclusively, would, however, seem anxious and artificial if I were to neglect such influences as her father.

In the *Statesman’s Manual*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge contends that the imagination exists as part of an interrelationship.

Of the discursive understanding, which forms for itself general notions and terms of classification for the purpose of comparing and arranging phenomena, the Characteristic is Clearness without Depth. It contemplates the unity of things in their limits only, and is consequently a knowledge of superficies without substance...The completing power which unites clearness with depth, the plentitude of the sense with the comprehensibility of the understanding itself becomes intuitive, and a living power. The REASON...as the integral spirit of the regenerated man...regenerateth all other powers...the REASON without being either the SENSE, the UNDERSTANDING, or the IMAGINATION contains all three within itself. (69-70)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge presents the imagination as fundamentally bound to the other facets of the mind and associates it with a “living power” that unifies and regenerates. Yet, as Alison Hickey reveals in her essay, “‘The Body of My Father’s Writings’: Sara Coleridge’s Genial Labour”, despite his belief and participation in collaborative forms of authorship, Sara’s editorial work focused on constructing an individualized image of her father’s genius. Ironically, her struggle to individualize his authorial property is at odds with her own collaborative efforts, a contradiction that may expose the falsity of singular genius, a concept that the Romantic male poet, epitomized in William Wordsworth, clung to, but which Sara, in attempting to sustain it, undermines. “If individuality is co-produced, how individual is it?” (Hickey 3). Hickey’s question is relevant to this study, which concerns itself with a maternal literature that nurtures and begets, disseminating and yet also questioning masculine criteria -- collaboratively (re)constructing. Some parts of this study may seem to wander from the core text, Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion*; however, in considering her editorial endeavors, it is my hope to expose the non-fictional sources at work in her fairy tale, while narrowing the divide between these various genres.

Sara Coleridge did inherit her father’s balanced approach to understanding the mind and used it to shape her philosophies of education. She was fervently against the kind of learning that featured suffering as an instructive medium -- rigid instruction void of the “living power” of fantasy. She writes, “though these fretting trials *may* be turned to good account, may strengthen the mind, and do certainly purchase considerateness and reflective habits...their direct tendency is to injure: all pain is injurious unless made

otherwise by an effort of the will” (qtd. in Jones 279). Consequently, her son Herbert was never pressured to learn; Sara explains that she chose to “give him classical Fairy Tales instead of modern poverty-stricken fiction” (Jones 237). The primary feminine character in Sara’s fairy tale, Pontentilla, is, although also the fairy artisan of insects, a mother figure and symbolizes what Sara aspired to achieve in her role as educator. Sara uses one of the many struggles in the story, when Phantasmion is held captive in Glandreth’s cave and believes that he will “perish since Pontentilla does not come to [his] aid,” to explore the nature of the maternal relationship (*Phantasmion* 170). She associates maternal power with imagination; certainly, it was a mother’s responsibility to teach her children how to dream. After Phantasmion is rescued by a swarm of insects that loosen his bands, he realizes that “he had not been neglected by Pontentilla, who had been employed in his service ever since he entered the dungeon” (*Phantasmion* 170-71). This reveals the complexity of the maternal relationship, which includes expectation and disappointment. Pontentilla likens herself to the “eagle teaching her young one to fly, gradually widening their airy circles” (*Phantasmion* 11); the fairy tale, the epitome of adventure and imaginative growth, is a guidebook, a tool used to aid the expansion of a child’s developing mind. Sara Coleridge, who was a guide to her children through her imaginative teachings, is symbolized, perhaps, in the character of Pontentilla, who recognizes that Phantasmion

...needest no fairy to work wonders for thee, being so young that all thou beholdest is new and marvelous in thine eyes. But the day must come when this happiness will fade away; when the stream, less clear than at its outset, will no longer return such bright reflections; then, if thou...call upon the name of Pontentilla, I will appear before thee, and exert all my power to renew the delights and wonders of thy childhood. (*Phantasmion* 3)

This emphasis on identity and imagination is, perhaps, the essence of Sara's fairy tale.

A cultivator of her children's imaginations, Sara Coleridge did what she instructs her "little book" to do in "L'Envoy of *Phantasmion*:" "tempt the wordlings into fairyland" (*Phantasmion* i). Regenerating her children's minds, Sara warded off "political economy and useful knowledge" which sought to assault and deplete them of the "living power" that would enable them to muddle through the "human hopes, and fears, and passions, and interests, and...changeful events and varying circumstances to which human life is liable" (*Memoir and Letters* 84). Yet, following the same kind of logic that reduces Sara to the organizer of her father's thoughts, this process of teaching and guiding might also suggest that Sara was living vicariously through her children. Teaching, an act of propagating knowledge, involves an extension of the self -- a diffusion; in fact, Kathleen Jones suggests that, "Herbert's many prizes were as much a tribute to his mother's scholarship as to his own" (Jones 278). Sara could achieve a scholarly position at Oxford by imaginatively participating in her son's life, through an essentially shared mind -- a kind of hereditary mind, which in her fairy tale is symbolized in the image of "the mind of Iarine, [which is] her mother's monument" (*Phantasmion* 343). Yet, it is more likely that Sara's commitment to her son was, instead, an example of the expectation that women would aid their sons, brothers and fathers in their quest for education and identity. Sara played the role of artistic and practical muse and fairy godmother; continuously having to mend the problem of her father's unreliability (financial and paternal), which Daniel Robinson terms "chronic indigence" (115), she began her first literary effort, the translation of Martin Dobrizhoffer's *Historia de*

Abiponibus (1784), in an attempt to raise funds and send her brother Derwent to Cambridge (Robinson 115). Consequently, Sara Coleridge's choice to write anonymously is not particularly surprising, and is perhaps a mixture of humility and self-abdication. She resigned herself to operate as a partly visible figure in the literary world, as the editor of her father's work. In 1845 she writes of her work on her father's "fragmentary" text *Biographia Literaria*:

The trouble I take is so ridiculously disproportioned to any effect that can be produced, and we are so apt to measure our importance by the efforts we make, rather than the good we do, that I am obliged to keep reminding myself of this very truth, in order not to become a mighty person in my own eyes, while I remain as small as ever in the eyes of every one else. (*Memoir and Letters* 242)

The exhausting work of piecing together her father's writing -- following his words, verifying quotations, defending his character, warding off accusations of plagiarism, translating marginalia so meticulously that "a whole day's work would result in one erasure" (Woolf 75) -- made her appear (and the oxymoron is intentional) almost invisible, more a part of the text than a separate-minded editor. She resists perceiving herself as a "mighty person". When I read this line I trip over "in order not to become," and re-read it, having to resist forcibly assigning her a sense of pride and self-worth. Yet, it is a complex passage that demands more than a cursory reading. There is some evidence, given that she must "keep reminding [herself] of this truth," that this truth is not natural for her and that she does not concur with the societal conception of what constitutes a "mighty person" (Hickey 4).

As Hickey reveals, her "preoccupation with the discrepancy between what remains invisible and what is 'shewn' ... reflects her sense of the apparent distance of her

editorial toil from the kind of work that makes one a ‘mighty person’ -- work she implicitly associates with authoring as opposed to editing” (an idea she shares with her most severe critic, Virginia Woolf, for whom editing is comparable to “‘throwing up molehills’”) (Hickey 4). However, as Sara Coleridge admits to measuring her “importance by the efforts [she] makes,” it is clear that she also questions the societal judgment that perceives her work in such a way that she is seen “as small as ever in the eyes of every one else” (*Memoir and Letters* 45). The conflict caused by the discrepancies between Sara Coleridge’s gender and the masculine nature of her education, lead her to comment that, “such labours cannot be rewarded for they cannot be seen” (*Memoir and Letters* 45). Female invisibility became an expectation for Sara, and also perhaps a code of conduct.

Sara’s brother Hartley remarked that, of the three Coleridge children, it was Sara who was “the ‘inheritrix of [their father’s] mind and genius,’” an inheritance which, combined with an education at the hands of Wordsworth and Southey, supplied her with “masculine criteria” (Jones 192). In employing the term, ‘genius,’ I should include Alison Hickey’s remark about Sara’s frequent use of the word “genial,” which reveals the complexities of the relationship she maintained with her father through her role as editor. “Not only is the man father of the child in this relationship,” Hickey explains, but “the child is mother of the man; the child is related to the man by marriage; she ‘generates’ with him; she is inspirited by him; she gives birth to and presides over his genius” (Hickey 2). These complexities are problematic because, as Hickey reminds us, the

English term ‘genius’ was as associated with male sexual and generative powers as the Latin genius, which originally meant ‘the begetting spirit of the family

embodied in the paterfamilias'; the genius was supposed to ensure the continuance of the property and fertility of the gens or male clan. (Hickey 2)

Sara was of the wrong sex to be "begetting" and carrying on, although this conception of genius was renovated somewhat as the female role of the 'literary maternal' emerged. It is no surprise that Sara Coleridge, in reading her father, for whom a genius could only be a male author whose creative acts echo a male God's eternal "act of creation in the infinite I AM" (Hickey 3), considered her own female self to be a "splendid failure" and was frustrated by the limitations of her "'helpless and dependent'" gender (*Memoir and Letters* 78). Subsequently, she coveted the conspicuous persona of a man, belonging to the literary crowd and the wasted masculinity of her brothers, Hartley, who left Oxford charged with "habitual drunkenness," and Derwent, who failed to perform well on his examinations at Cambridge (Robinson 116). Although Sara Coleridge was an "accomplished essayist" and "competent editor," she worked along the edges of the literary world -- edges formed by her gender and made more prominent by her beauty and intellect, which combined were a source of shame and estrangement, causing her to suspend the life of the mind and write as she could, as a daughter and mother, editing her father's writings (a peculiar sort of ventriloquism) and in the seemingly contextless and 'feminine' genre of children's literature (Robinson 114).

Sara saw an opening for herself as an educator. Although she inherited conventional notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' and generally yielded to the constraints imposed on her gender, she sought to achieve a feminine ideal, which she felt she could attain through the refining process of education. In a letter dated March 6, 1849, she writes that "none can govern so well as those who know how to obey, or can

teach so effectively as those who have been docile learners” (*Memoir and Letters* 375). She seems quite aware, given her disturbing and sober analysis of the usage of feminine intellect, of her compliant role within the mechanics of patriarchal society -- a system fuelled and greased by masculine logic. Yet, her compliance paradoxically enables her to become the very figure she ridicules: the female writer who possesses supposedly masculine skills. Portraying herself as the dutiful daughter or maternal educator, Sara fulfills and perpetuates stereotypes of femininity while simultaneously expanding her own life to include authorship.

It is no coincidence that Sara Coleridge infuses *Phantasmion* with landscapes and characters that embody the theme of banishment. Iarine’s mother Anthemmina is exiled to the “Lost Land,” a distant and unknown location that Pontentilla discloses after Oloola’s [the spirit of the Blast and of clouds] power, which had long forced her to conceal, dissipates; it is a peninsula “cut off from the neighbour countries by an impassable marsh” (*Phantasmion* 333). Anthemmina, a mother figure in the story, roams “on that dreary coast” a symbol of the ostracized, Romantic female subject who is kept within the stagnant space of a normative identity, where “she fared till not a vestige of her former being remained but that one miserable dream” (*Phantasmion* 333) -- the dream of who she could have been.

Typical of the genre, the essence of *Phantasmion* lies at its end; the final poem, which occurs in the second to last chapter, is steeped in images of nature, as is the entirety of the tale, to such an extent that they become rather cloying. In wading through them, it is amusing to remember Sara Coleridge’s criticism of Keats. “I admire Keats

extremely,” she writes, “but I think that he wants solidity. His path is all flowers, and leads to nothing but flowers. The end of ‘Endymion’ has no point: when we arrive there, it is looking down a land of flowers, stretching on *ad infinitum*...” (*Memoir and Letters* 236). Her own repetitive use of excessive, idyllic, but ordinary, even “generic,” images of “primrose tufts impearl’d with dew” (57) and “blooms...scattered o’er,/Decked in softest lustre” (*Phantasmion* 80), appear to disguise the fundamental motives and ideologies that revolve around the fairy tale’s “mature themes of parental death, sexual seduction, violence, murder and metaphysical evil” (Robinson 117).

Not simply an intellectual concept for the Romantics, nature is here an elusive metaphor for the complexity of the female subject, an identity that surpasses the superficiality of delicacy and etiquette. Sara Coleridge reveals, by consistently pausing at the notion of change, the ludicrous nature of dogmatic conceptions, which seek to make still a life that is innately dynamic. The shifting surfaces of nature are often used to symbolize the idea of human mutability -- that human character, although a social construct, is not singular or fixed. Shot through with images of light, water, sound, confinement, waste and pretense, *Phantasmion* plays with the normative conception of identity by revealing that the natural world reflects the essential self. Implying a sense of fluidity that is at odds with the fixity of the earth and the social structure, which in the text loses its solid texture, and is a “daily changing floor” (*Phantasmion* 33), imagery of light, water and sound reflect the “changeful events and varying circumstances to which,” Sara writes in a letter to her husband, “human life is liable” (Robinson 118).

Sara Coleridge further demonstrates both the innate, shifting quality of life and the human ability to reconfigure the self by employing a “profusion of specimens” (*Phantasmion* 10). Pontentilla, the “ancient and slender fairy” (2) transforms the young prince, Phantasmion, into an “eagle” with her transmutative wand, bestowing “powers like those which insects have;” at once connected to earthly and mystical phenomena, he is a “bright stranger,” who “soars” on “wings of enchantment” (10). Sara demonstrates the imagination’s ability to transform social identity when she describes (and we do get the sense that the voice of the third-person omniscient narrator is Sara, as mother, relaying the story) Phantasmion’s ‘change’ after having been touched with the fairy’s wand.

The moment that Pontentilla touched him with her wand a sensation of lightness ran throughout his body, and instantly afterwards he perceived that wings played on his shoulders, wings of golden green adorned with black embroidery: beneath an emerald coronet his radiant locks clustered in large soft rings, and wreathed themselves around his snowy forehead: robes of white silk floated over his buoyant limbs, and his full eyes, lately closed in languor, beamed with joyful expectation, while a more than child-like bloom rose mantling to his cheek. (11)

Sara Coleridge presents images of the human body in mystical language to accentuate the change that occurs; his body is permeated with a “lightness,” which suggests that he has transcended his rigid human form, causing his “buoyant limbs” to float. In using “buoyant,” she infers the presence of fluid, in which his limbs are able to float with ease. The imagination is equated with the effects of water, which seems to alter the composition of the human body; here, the power of imagination is symbolized by the ethereal fairy queen and her insects, who endow Phantasmion with an elasticity of spirit.

Interestingly, although it is Sara's intention to situate the imagination within the realm of human possibility, so as to portray the fairy tale as a medium useful in the development of the human intellect and imagination, she employs disembodied creatures to act as its symbolic agents -- as if imagining were a foreign action, and to some extent, out of human reach. (I should resist slipping into the delusion of fairyland, resist believing in it *fully*; I must remember that all of this, and the insects, are a metaphor.) Sara does remind us of the metaphorical nature of her story with words that keep us at a distance; instead of there being a "lightness" there is only a "sensation of" it and Phantasmion merely "perceives" that wings play on his shoulders. Fantasy is a perspective. All of this metaphorical enchantment is there to teach us how to see (especially when our eyes are closed).

Endowed with the power of fantasy, Phantasmion becomes a "transcendent" being who possesses the ability to perceive the world from a foreign, lucid perspective (11). Curiously, Phantasmion's transformation also appears to provide him with a feminine persona; with his delicate clothes of "black embroidery," "emerald coronet" and soft, feminine locks, he resembles the feminized, male Romantic poet, an aura that questions the true gender of this hero. He possesses a childlike purity, with "snowy forehead" and "robes of white silk," yet has "more than child-like bloom;" he has not regressed into a childhood but has rather achieved a renewed, cultivated innocence inspired by the imagination. Phantasmion, who began as an estranged figure, reestablishes his maternal ties and his connections to the imaginative world of "butterflies, those angel insects" that

Flew round and round in a thousand starry wheels, while here and there one butterfly would flit aloof for a few moments, then sink into the circle and revolve indistinguishably with the rest: now the entire wheel flew off into splinters, now reconstructed itself at once, as if but a single life informed its several parts. (*Phantasmion* 10)

This swarm of butterflies, from which Phantasmion chooses a set of wings, symbolizes the world that the maternal narrator gradually reveals to the orphaned, mortal boy. It is a world in which he will realize himself to be at once a singular entity that “flits aloof for a few moments” and a part, an indistinguishable part, of a moving circle of life that is continually involved in constructing and reconstructing itself, a process that relies on the movements of each insect, which have the ability to alter the direction and formation of the swarm. The passage, while reflecting the shape of the quest narrative, also reveals the nature of the female Romantic who occupies several different identities or roles. Yet this image, instead of invoking a sense of fracture, suggests that each facet of woman, a “splinter,” is then reconstructed, “as if but a single life informed its several parts” and the several parts the single life (*Phantasmion* 10). This is the story of Sara Coleridge. Multifaceted, she struggled to reconcile the various, often opposing, parts of her identity.

Sara Coleridge explored the role of motherhood, reluctantly and anxiously, ultimately attaining a sense of resolve by fusing her parental responsibilities with another “splinter” of her character. Although the fairy tale obviously extends beyond the limits of its juvenile context, we should consider its function as children’s literature, as well as the role of the mother, which is integral to the genre. Sara grapples with the role of woman in her fairy tale, using a myriad of feminine characters to reveal the various facets of womanhood. She complicates female identity by including a peculiar, androgynous

figure; Malderyl, “sitting on the floor, an urn by her side, a branch of red berries on her lap, her fingers wet with purple juice...her eyes shot fire” is the same form that revealed itself earlier as a “gardener...gathering berries in a basket” and had divulged to Phantasmion that his mother was dead. Phantasmion recognizes in him the spirit of his poisoned friend, Dariel, and realizes that the “strange old man,” “witch” and “murderess,” are one (*Phantasmion* 8, 224). The characteristics that are customarily used to distinguish males and females are instead fused in such a way that suggests wisdom, but also deformity. With eyes of fire, the “witch” who is also a “strange old man” and “murderess” is regarded as inhuman. This figure, ostracized for its eccentric nature, embodies society’s derogatory reaction to Romantic female writers who invest themselves in selfish, literary endeavors. The author blends a host of characters to represent this mysterious figure, whose stained fingers invoke a sense of violence. This blurring of gender signals an attempt to reconsider the normative distinctions associated with masculinity and femininity. And yet, the cruelty associated with this figure complicates the reconfiguration.

Sara Coleridge offers other unusual characters in her attempt to grapple with the limits of female subjectivity. There are also three slim damsels who often appear together, the heroine Iarine and the sisters Leucoia and Zelneth, all of whom, to the distress of modern feminists, marry at the end of the story. Carl Woodring argues that these figures represent the three daughters: Sara Coleridge, Dora Wordsworth and Edith May Southey, and suggests that Sara drew on her childhood in the Lake country for the creation of her fairy tale (Woodring 217). Other feminine entities in the tale include a

host of bodiless fairies and nymphs composed of organic materials, some of which yield more power than others; from Feydeleen, the benevolent, but usually ineffective, Spirit of Flowers, to the overseer, Pontentilla who, possessing the ability to initiate change, redirects the action of the story. With “wings upon [her] shoulders,” Pontentilla, although slender and initially mistaken by Phantasmion as his nurse, is a disembodied entity -- unencumbered by a female body.

Sara Coleridge, aware of the role women played in nineteenth-century England, juxtaposes the stereotypical, feminine roles of nurse and fairy, focusing on their differences in strength and power. Pontentilla responds to Phantasmion’s confusion, “I am not like thy nurse: I can do that which is beyond her skill” (*Phantasmion 2*). The initial blurring of identities suggests that these two entities belong to the singular character of woman -- each a facet of the female subject, one domesticated and the other an autonomous, wild being in possession of the “wings” of imagination, which endow the beholder with transformative powers (*Phantasmion 2*). Sara recovers motherhood in this character of the “little old fairy,” the “winged woman,” “strange woman,” yet dramatically changes the role, so as to liberate the mother figure, focusing on her as guide and also, perhaps, philosopher (4-10).

Elizabeth Fay writes at length in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*, about what she terms a ‘maternal nationalism’ and its relationship to children’s literature. She attempts to legitimize the female writer of fantasy by politicizing her role as educator whereby teaching becomes a subversive act. Fay argues that the ‘safe’ genre of children’s literature offers “women a way to assert their views publicly and to effect

political change” (Fay 92). “One way the new genre aids these goals,” Fay continues, “is through the author’s adoption of the mother function to teach the child the alphabet, reading, morals, and respect for nature” (Fay 92). Sara’s work is no exception; as previously discussed, the primary function of *Phantasmion* is as an educational tool that facilitates the dissemination of her philosophies (which are there, even if she felt reluctant to see them as such). Fay suggests that, although male Romantics experimented with this genre, “women were by far the greatest producers of this material” (Fay 93). How can we, as twenty-first century literary researchers, keen on establishing a feminine Romanticism, not have explored this exclusively female genre more fully? -- perhaps because we are still reluctant to assign it literary respect (Fay 93). Fay uses William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a masculine example, a canonical classic that also makes us perk up our heads and take the fairy world seriously.

There are interesting parallels between Sara Coleridge’s *Phantasmion* and Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*: the maternal oak tree in the “Echoing Green” shares an affinity with Pontentilla’s “pomegranate tree,” under which dreams come true. These mystical images of nature are portholes into an imaginative world, through which children may escape the mundane trappings of civilized society and its plethora of rules. Both authors juxtapose these symbols of fantasy and escape with warnings of assimilation and coercion. The infamous “chartered street” of “London” portrays a rigid, structured society, in which human beings mechanically repeat words and consume ideas, perpetuating dogmatic beliefs, while creating their own limitations and forging their own “mind” “manacles” (qtd. in Wu 54). “The Garden of Love” and its oppressive signs,

“‘Thou shalt not’ writ over the door,” and the mesmerizing “Tiger, tiger burning bright/In the forests of the night” (Wu 64-78) invoke frightening images of mind control, an issue which Sara Coleridge explores through reference to mind altering liquids and fragrances “well known to produce unnatural sleep” and the scheming water witch, Seshelma and her “poisonous fish” (*Phantasmion* 45). Sara Coleridge creates a dichotomous landscape, which is separated by Black Mountains. Palmland, which is a fertile land of agriculture and the other a mechanized, industrial land of Rockland, which is “craggy and barren, rich only in metals, marbles, and other stones, and in materials for making glass and porcelain” reflect Blake’s callous images of the city and articulate the sense of resentment offered by both authors, who mourn the inhumanity of human culture (*Phantasmion* 45). Both Blake and Sara Coleridge fuse ‘innocence’ and ‘experience’ into a seemingly, simplistic lyrical format, which relates both the beauties and atrocities of life to a young audience in the process of forming its mental and social attitudes. Through the “voice of the bard!/Who present, past and future sees,” children are cautioned, instructed, enlightened, frightened and inspired (Wu 65).

Fay makes another point essential to this discussion of fairy tales and Romantic women writers. She argues that women’s attempt to engage in political conversation and to assert their opinions by using the medium of children’s literature “produced its own drawback by making possible a hostile interpretation of literary maternalism as the capacity to write for children only” (Fay 93). Capacity is one of the issues at the heart of this study of feminine Romanticism and will be further discussed in the following section. It was not that women, in general, were incapable of writing outside juvenile

contexts; many female writers did cross that boundary, but that there were many constraints which limited their scope. “Like radical women,” Fay continues, “conservative women [one of whom was Sara Coleridge] also found their solutions to their own representation being used against them” (Fay 93). In an era preoccupied with appearance, even feminists had to conform to a particular image, use a language appropriate for dissenting feminists, and articulate their ideas within the bounds of an overtly subversive medium.

Sara Coleridge employs a funeral scene to rehabilitate and facilitate the role and voice of the maternal teacher in Romantic literature. The scene in which Iarine realizes that her mother cannot be “entombed beneath a solid, marble pile,” but that her face is “the face of the deep, with its changeful hues and emotions,” that “the mind of Iarine, [is] her mother’s monument” evokes a pluralized femininity that sustains itself through the creative act of childbearing (*Phantasmion* 343). Coleridge salvages the role of the mother in literature. In paying homage to the ‘dead mother,’ who has been betrayed by life, and by incorporating her into the mutable images of nature (which throughout Romantic poetry serves as a substitute for human maternity), Sara Coleridge reconceives motherhood as a process and sustains the need for the maternal role, legitimizing and immortalizing it. Elizabeth Fay argues in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*, that orphans permeate the writings of this period, a detail that reflects the sense of disillusion and estrangement experienced by male poets, including Sara’s father.

Curiously, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey, as well as their wives, had been orphaned at an early age (Jones xiv). The figure of the orphan is a

literary phenomenon that incorporates the “idea that the hero could no longer define himself through ‘normal’ or integrated social groups; instead, his quest is to find himself, with the help of separated others, through a union of Nature” (Jones 92). This is essentially the story of *Phantasmion*, and of Sara’s father, who after being rejected by his mother at an early age, searched for a maternal link through his connections with women, poetry and nature. However, Samuel Taylor Coleridge found it difficult to complete his journey of self-discovery through the written word, telling his wife that he “could neither retain [his] Happiness, nor [his] Faculties, unless [he could] move, live and love, in perfect Freedom...” (Jones 109). This association between freedom, identity and writing is at the core of the quest narrative, which relates, metaphorically, the story of life and survival. Sara alters this literary trend somewhat, although in other ways she perpetuates it.

Phantasmion loses both his mother, Queen Zalia, and his father, King Dormiant, who dies of “eating poisoned honey” (a danger of the mid-life crisis) (*Phantasmion* 7). Phantasmion, too young to inherit the throne of Palmland and living in a “state of dejection,” experiences “melancholy which seizes [his] spirit,” causing him to seek escape (in fact, renewal) through imagination. Yet, Sara does alter the typical quest narrative of the orphaned boy and his lone, introspective journey by substituting his mother for the maternal figure, “queen of the insect realm,” Pontentilla, with whom Phantasmion behaves as a dependent, “stretching out both hands” and crying, “Pontentilla! Help! Help! (*Phantasmion* 10). Although Phantasmion is a lone traveler,

like the male figures of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, he is continually nurtured by female inspiration.

Returning to Iarine and the death of her mother, Anthemmina, it is essential to note the way that Sara melds the mother into the “face” of nature. This act could be perceived as an erasure of the mother’s identity. However, from the extent to which the mother’s body is celebrated by the “nymphs” who surround her in “the weedy coronals from their heads” (*Phantasmion* 336), it seems that the mother’s position is instead elevated; in death, she becomes a kind of philosopher who speaks through her child. In recreating herself in her daughter -- the “mind of [Iarine] is her mother’s monument” -- she becomes the ultimate creator.

Employing a funeral scene to comment on the way that human beings create and live in one another, moulding and designing identity, Sara Coleridge insinuates that, although we exist as separate and sculpted monuments, we are not of the normative, still variety, but rather products of human processes, interactions and experiences, which we inherit from others, as Sara did from her father. Sara Coleridge uses the space of the fairytale to resist this stillness and play with feminine mutability, a ‘play’ which insinuates that context, a perpetually moving phenomenon, *is* identity, though often made to remain artificially static. It is not that woman can be only one thing or another, but that societal perception is limited and narrow. Sara Coleridge suggests that reality possesses the qualities of illusion, that reality is a dream, which unlike the genuinely pretend world of the fairy tale, betrays us. The death of Iarine’s mother, Anthemmina, who “had been deceived by the watery vision, and whom the figures there portrayed did

truly represent,” signals a symbolic death of a life of dreams -- an unfastening of the delusion, a life that “had ever been a mere vision to her” (*Phantasmion* 335). Here, it becomes clear that the fairy tale serves as a metaphor for human beings who are creatures of artifice, yet also of change. A fairytale, or as Daniel Robinson would argue, “ostensibly a fairytale,” *Phantasmion*, employs enchanting artifice, yet opposes the normative variety of beauty which imprisons (Robinson 117).

The closing poem opens with the overt symbol of a framed portrait which gathers connotations of contrived and restrained appearances, qualities that Victorian portraiture endeavored to achieve. “Poor is the portrait that one look portrays,/It mocks the face on which we loved to gaze” (*Phantasmion* 343). Coleridge recognized that beauty, although it was something she wished she could have extended to her daughter who was plain, was a merely ‘appropriate’ reproduction of the imposed, cultural stereotype of femininity. She writes to a friend, after receiving from him a “beauteous flower and lovely poem,” that she once “heard a very clever man insist that children may be taught to admire toads and spiders, and think them as beautiful as butterflies, birds of paradise, or such a lily as you have sent me” (*Memoir and Letters* 523); and she does, in fact, attempt to redefine, or at least expand, the normative concept of beauty by featuring in her fairy tale the fairy artisan of insects, Pontentilla, and her eclectic swarms. Beauty is a frequent subject of her writing, particularly her own “faulty sort of prettiness” (Jones 232), which was faulty because it was scarred by an interfering intellect and, therefore, not of the pure, feminine variety.

Sara Coleridge and Harriet Martineau, whose circumstance shaped her into Sara's opposite, converged in their opinions about feminine beauty. In his chapter, "The House of Bondage," Mudge writes about Martineau's "plain looks and awkward stature," which was "exacerbated by early deafness" (Mudge 42). Martineau's physical appearance and disabilities made it impossible for her to fit into the roles of wife and mother, just as Sara's beauty prevented her from living an entirely intellectual life. Harriet's candid and radical political character attracted the conservative Sara. Both women argued against female vanity, Sara in her "Essay on Beauty" and Martineau in her essay "On Female Education".

When woman is allowed to claim her privileges as an intellectual being, the folly, the frivolity, and all the mean vices and faults which have hitherto been the reproach of the sex, will gradually disappear. As she finds nobler objects presented to her grasp, and that her rank in the scale of being is elevated, she will engraft the vigorous qualities of the mind of man on her own blooming virtues and insinuate into his mind those softer graces and milder beauties, which will smooth the ruggedness of his character. (Martineau 80)

Martineau's passage is intriguing, but also unnerving, because it relates a peculiar process -- the celebrated process of de-feminization. After she explains the effacement of woman's feminine character, she employs a gardening term, "engraft," to describe the acquiring of male attributes. "The vigorous qualities of the mind of man" will be affixed to the "blooming virtues" of woman, a floral metaphor that patronizes female sexuality and portrays the female subject as someone who is always 'in the process' of becoming -- never quite able to attain the nobility associated with men, unless she cultivates masculinity. Female beauty is portrayed as freakish because it is conspicuous, consisting of "folly," "fault" and "frivolity."

Martineau suggests that the single option available for women wanting to “claim her privileges as an intellectual being” is androgyny. The intellectual must be de-sexed. If one is a woman, the sexuality associated with the female body must be suppressed and the appearance of the feminine gender defaced. She proposes a ‘swapping’ of gender traits so that the “ruggedness” of men could be smoothed out by milder and softer female characteristics, which suggests the construction of a diluted form of neither sex. Although it could be argued that the typical ‘male Romantic poet’ already possessed an air of femininity, her proposed creation of an insipid, androgynous form is equally destructive to the integrity of the male subject. However, her peculiar remarks stem from what is the essential issue -- socially constructed identities, which are created by an imposed sense of shame. Martineau’s misogynistic description relates to comments that Sara made to her brother Derwent: “I should have been happier, with my taste, temper, and habits had I been of your sex instead of the helpless, dependent being I am” (Jones 192).

Beauty haunted Sara; as a child she lived a metaphorical identity, which was enforced by her diminutive appearance. She was painted by William Collins whose portrait of her was hung in the Royal Academy in London; afterwards, she was known as “The Highland Girl,” “Flower of the Lakes” and “Sylph of Ullswater” (Jones 202). Described as “a form of compacted light, not flesh and blood, so radiant was her hair, so slender her form, so buoyant her step, and heaven-like her eyes,” she resembles the feminine nymphs and spirits of her fairy tale (Jones 202). It is conceivable that these characters were designed by Sara in an attempt to mock the masculine practice of beauty

worshipping. Interestingly, the description of Sara given by Dorothy Wordsworth indicates a correlation between Sara's restive life and the imaginary geography of the fairyland about which she would write and, perhaps, in some ways also inhabit.

...she seemed so very little, such a slender delicate creature, fair as a snow-drop, and was then almost as pale. But when she twirled about upon the carpet the exquisite grace of her motions, her half Lady, half Spirit Form; and her interesting countenance made her an object of pure delight. She is quick as a Fairy -- every thing about her diminutive except her eyes which may be called majestic. (Wordsworth 166)

Sara Coleridge was forced to live a still life, a monument to feminine delicacy. So, she survived where fairies and spirit forms do, in an imaginative land. Carl Woodring's short essay, *Sara fille: Fairy Child*, perpetuates this portrayal of Sara Coleridge, drawing correlations between her physical appearance, her literary nurturing by Southey and Wordsworth and her subsequent production of a fairy tale composed of "illusion, spells, unnatural sleep, and dreams." "The fairy child," Woodring writes, "once regaled with midnight fairy tales, grew into the author of *Phantasmion*" (Woodring 216-17). An orphaned creature nurtured inside the 'bubble-like' world of the Lake country, Sara possesses the qualities of a fairy, or, at least, Woodring suggests, somewhat sarcastically, a "Cinderella, with her maligned absent father as the fairy godmother" (Woodring 212).

However, her father seems an unlikely candidate for this role of 'inducer' of imaginative power, a role symbolized in the character of Pontentilla, *Phantasmion*'s guardian and fairy artisan of insects who often rescues him from death and dungeons. When *Phantasmion* is held captive in a cave, Pontentilla sends

a multitude of saw-flies with yellow bodies and black heads...along with them came numbers of wasps...they alighted on the cords that bound his arms and wings...the wasps with their jaws, the flies with their rasping instruments, they

severed the tough threads, till the prisoner, by a single effort, snapped the weakened bands; at that moment his arms were stretched at full length, and his wings broke forth like the tender leaves of a tree. (*Phantasmion* 170-171)

It is much more likely that this fairy godmother figure, a symbol of imaginative power and freedom, is a feminine entity -- perhaps the subversive 'other'. This power, which manifests itself in the form of flying insects, symbolizes the nature of Sara's role as writer. Unable to assume the role of a "tall, strong and striking" man, Sara remained an inconspicuous member of the literary world, moving (in the distant place of wonder) her 'wand of words', with which she hoped to affix the 'wings' of imagination -- imaginings that would perhaps alter the Victorian middle-class attitudes and behaviours that conform to standards and conventions and which suffer from a preoccupation with respectability and material values. Upon reflection of Sara's essay on Wordsworth, which identifies the poet as a philosopher, a speaker of truths and an enlightener, it seems likely that the fairy muse is the feminized male poet. Yet the "wasps with their jaws and the flies with their rasping instruments" which sever and weaken the ropes that imprison *Phantasmion*, a manifestation of the imagination, possess a sense of aggression and defiance. "Encouraged to consider herself delicate," Sara Coleridge was never quite able to realize herself in this world; and therefore it would seem that the fairy tale provided her with an artistic elasticity -- the power to play with the boundaries of her world. Yet this ability to become the "'other,' truculent, disobedient, independently minded, creative, sexual being" (Jones xviii) remained for Coleridge always on the other side of the mirror. Though she as an author possessed the power of a "transformative, mythic imagination" (Jones xviii), parts of her life remained conventional and restricted.

Sara Coleridge, reflecting on the nature of identity, states, “it is politic to tell our own story, for if we do not, it will surely be told for us, and always a degree more disadvantageously than the truth warrants” (Jones 252). If she had only known how true this would be. A few critics and historians have attempted to tell her story for her (or for themselves) and were invited, they might even say, by the ellipsis trailing from the last sentence of her twenty-six page autobiographical fragment. “...dots intervene,” Virginia Woolf writes (Woolf 73). These dots proved to be too alluring to be left dangling; they beg, it seems, for someone to add new words to the unfinished story of Sara Coleridge. Woolf explains that Sara “intended, she says, to end every section with a moral, or a reflection. And then ‘on reviewing my earlier childhood I find the predominant reflection...’ There she stops. But she said many things in those twenty-six pages, and Mr. Griggs has added others that tempt us to fill in the dots, though not with the facts that she might have given us” (Woolf 73).

There is danger in ventriloquism -- in writing about the dead, especially about those who have not left behind a distinct and incontestable image of themselves. In criticizing the way that some have ‘filled in the dots,’ I am not arguing against engaging in this process; instead, I mean to expose and question the intentions of those who do the filling. Attaining a clear reflection, although an impossible task, as Edith Coleridge recognizes in the preface to the collected *Memoir and Letters* (fragments taken out of context, which merely offer a “mirrored reflection” of her mother) is a problem that Sara Coleridge pauses on frequently in her fairy tale. Edith focuses on this particularly feminine problem with a keen sense of empathy and awareness. She understood the

difficulty of misunderstood women writers who attempted to reach beyond the roles of wife, mother, scholar and author. The compilation of another's writings, a task that Edith shared with Sara, who some would argue, "subjugated her own literary ambitions" (Robinson 119) to edit and organize her father's words (and to shape that which remained of him), is an attempt to eradicate the portrait "that one look portrays" -- the singular look that history has ascribed to Sara Coleridge and to offer in its place gestures, faces, conversations, thoughts and words, to reveal the "unconscious self-portraits" of a woman (*Memoir and Letters* ix). "A Spirit, yet a Woman too." This short, yet poignant quotation from William Wordsworth appears in almost indecipherable, small print on the cover page to the *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, an epitaph.

Sara Coleridge possessed the qualities of genius which, in her environment, did not mix smoothly with her gender and beauty, but rather disabled her from being "just what a girl of that age ought to be." Sara dwelt, uncomfortably in between the recognized roles for women. She was "spoilt by too much learning" (Jones 194) according to Sara Hutchinson who preferred Edith May with whom she could discuss the "prevailing colour" of shoes and "fashion for the hair," which was "stroaked up very high behind and fastened in plaits and bows." Sara Hutchinson was confused by Coleridge because she "was bookish" and uninterested in discussions about hair accessories; yet, she was not "a protesting feminine thinker" (Jones 194). Not a clear 'feminist' of the period, there has been no place for her -- no category, other than as an addendum to her father's identity, to her father's words. Or perhaps it has been history that has made her into 'no one' and feminist critics, as severe (ironically) as Sara Coleridge herself, such as Virginia Woolf

who have reduced her to metaphors of shoddy portraiture, dismissing her as an “unfinished masterpiece” -- as if finishing were possible, or even desirable (Woolf 17). Finishing was certainly something that her father would not have been able to accomplish without his daughter’s editorial collaboration. Like the woman in the final poem of *Phantasmion*, Sara Coleridge had “a thousand past expressions all combin’d” in a complex and problematic identity: daughter, wife, mother, editor, essayist, translator, writer, genius, drug addict, hysteric and depressive, masochist and misogynist -- a psychologically intriguing woman whose portrait (that of it which remains), can here, only be partially revealed (*Phantasmion* 343).

In the post-Romantic era, the fairy tale symbolized frivolity and escapism. Yet, as a reflection of the bourgeois dream, this genre provides an alternative, fictional window into the historical and psychological complexities of the age and offers insight into the simultaneously submissive and subversive feminine identity. An innately human attribute, fantasy is both a product of, and a critical reaction to, the social world -- the ‘play’ of reflection. Sara Coleridge’s fairy tale, *Phantasmion*, reveals the need to re-examine the less prominent female writers of this period who critics, including modern ‘feminists,’ have reduced to passive bystanders, as well as the need to perceive them through the lens of their own, often metaphorical, creations -- from the ‘inside out.’

CHAPTER 2

SARA COLERIDGE

AND MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST CRITICISM

My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners; what I would like to grasp is the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent.

Foucault, "Rituals of Exclusion"

Previous discussion has traced the resurgent interest in the fairy tale and asked questions about the genre's psychological and societal relevance in an attempt to situate it in current conversations about gender and identity. I have discussed the lineage of the male Romantics in order to reconsider the dynamics of the paternal relationship and to undermine the gender division "between men's and women's writing," which Elizabeth Fay argues "blurs when we consider the textual evidence [:] the divide is political rather than artistic...politicized more by our own modes of reading than by the writers themselves" (105). In using critical perspectives as well as Sara Coleridge's private writing and published fairy tale, this study has worked to establish a sense of plurality and to complicate the accepted sense of Sara's identity by suggesting that she is misunderstood, misrepresented because she cannot be labeled as a clear feminist who worked to subvert patriarchy (Jones 95).

It is more difficult to understand the mind of a conservative woman whose methods of resistance are cloaked in a less obtrusive voice than it is a woman characterized by her defiance. In an attempt to gain further insight, I will consider several theoretical frameworks and in 'trying on' these frameworks, will attempt to build my own. These frames, or interpretative strategies designed by recent critics who seek to recover Sara as a writer who participated in a feminine Romanticism distinct from, yet inextricably related to, the movement more prominently associated with her father will assist me in my effort to resolve the problem of the Romantic female subject, or more precisely, the problem of how she has been critically perceived. I will use preceding aspects of this study as catalysts for the present discussion, which seeks to connect fantasy and the idea of the fairy tale as a legitimate genre employed by intellectual women as a subversive medium, the concept of the "literary maternal" and the fused roles of mother and educator, the roles that challenge the conventional division between public and private halves (Fay 93). From here, I will move into a discussion of the female body and psychiatry and how both relate to fantasy. Yet, in acknowledging the societal phenomena of hysteria and nervousness, I wish to prevent my study from focusing on this cliché of the 'Victorian madwoman.' Instead, I will conclude with an analysis of the literary impact of feminine Romanticism and suggest that the fairy tale is a metaphor for the female quest for identity.

The movement of this study intentionally oscillates, conjecturing and superimposing several contradictory images of Sara Coleridge in an attempt to negotiate an identity and to offer a definition of feminine Romanticism, or rather a working

semblance of one. We must consider the opposing views of this woman, from mere caretaker of her father's literary identity, to subversive educator; yet we must resist only speaking about her in extremist terms and recognize how her period shaped her politics. However, we should be careful not to dwell recklessly on her feminism because in doing so we risk distorting the female subject, an act committed by both early, male critics such as Reed and Griggs and contemporary feminists who focus (although quite differently) on the 'femaleness' of female writers, rather than their texts, which are often inflected by factors other than gender. Yet everything is inflected by gender. Elaine Showalter's "gynocriticism," a working hypothesis that women both write and read differently than men, is an underlying assumption of this project, which despite attempting, at moments, to shrink the gender divide and argue that this division is often politically induced rather than actual, must concede that the political and social climate is fundamentally different for men and women; therefore, my study highlights not the notion of 'biological differences,' but the theory that socially constructed and historically enforced gender roles work to shape different perceptions of the world.

Deirdre David begins *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy* (1987), with a straightforward explanation. "This book is about three *intelligent Victorian women* [my italics] who did not become exiles from Victorian culture and society and who defied the patriarchal injunctions against female authorship issued by Robert Southey" (Sara Coleridge's primary paternal influence) who instructed Charlotte Bronte that "literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be;" Southey told her that she should instead engage in what are a woman's "proper duties" (David viii). Harriet

Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot are presented by David as examples of feminine dissent; they are admirable, dignified women who sacrificed their private lives for involvement in the literary world. They are writers with whom contemporary feminist critics, tracing their intellectual lineage, do not hesitate to align themselves. Curiously, although not coincidentally, two of these women were childless; somehow by not belonging to the domestic society of motherhood, they were able to participate as members of the literary world. Not having to abide by the principles of the 'Angel in the House,' Martineau and Eliot did not have to fear, as Sara did, pregnancy and its consequent maternal commitments. Sara Coleridge's journal reveals the sense of entrapment that dominated her life as a married woman, listing the days and exact times that her menstrual periods arrived, including any variance in her cycle: "33 hours after the time...4 days late. Alas! Alas!" (Jones 251). Her body was for her 'a house of bondage.' The processes and acts associated with giving birth were at odds with intellectuality, which was considered male, and therefore pregnancy in fact marriage, appeared to involve relinquishing women's literary capacities because it made them less masculine, or made the reality of their female gender more apparent. Childbearing involves the body, and prevents the body, for a while at least, from 'serious' writing.

With exceptions like Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant, mothers could not easily be writers because of the practical demands of motherhood. Jones refers to Sara's experience of pregnancy and child-rearing as a "spiral" (Jones 231). Her mother wrote about her daughter's life as mistress of a household and mother of two young children; it was a life consisting of repetitive, perpetual, "house orders, suckling, dress and undress,

walking, serving,” a demanding schedule in competition with her desire to cultivate her own mental and intellectual health (Potter 34). Coleridge gave birth to and nurtured her children’s bodies and minds. Also, she edited her father’s work while longing to serve her own purposes, symbolized, perhaps, by an image embedded in one of the poems of her fairy tale, the “self-made womb” (*Phantasmion* 154). Female bodies that remain ‘unused’ or empty turn to those of nonsexual beings. No longer characterized by the utility of their bodies, intellectual women are disembodied minds. This essentialist reading may appear to contradict my earlier chapters, in which I argue for the organic, living and complex body; however, my purpose is to demonstrate the problematic nature of David’s androgynous female subject (Martineau, Browning and Eliot). By fitting this ‘type’ into the literary canon and by identifying her as the representative figure of feminine Romanticism, critics perpetuate the artificiality of the canon. We must ask *why* particular female writers were chosen to take a space beside their male peers in canonical literary history and why others were not. Perhaps the other, currently less politically correct, women do not serve the modern purpose of eradicating the submissive, maternal, feminine persona, yet their stories are essential to acquiring a complete picture of female writers and thinkers of the post-Romantic period.

If Deirdre David had written a similar essay on Sara Coleridge, it might have sounded quite different, even shocking; “this book is about a daughter and mother who kept her father’s words tidy and wrote sometimes (although only about fairies), who became exiled from Victorian [and subsequent] cultures and societies and who complied with the patriarchy...” She is no Mary Wollstonecraft. Her story is far less glamorous

and marketable because it is not revolutionary; in telling it, it is not my intention to undermine efforts to establish a legitimate feminine Romanticism that does not fall victim to the sense of hierarchy associated with the male literary movement. On the contrary, it is to manifest the domestic heroism of the conservative female writer and to salvage her metaphorical language, which although less brave, perhaps (and that is contestable) is “not triumphant but subtle, ready to fight and creative” (Kristeva 22). Sara Coleridge is not simply compliant. There are complications that prevent her from inhabiting either side of the infamous feminine divide. In fact, I would argue that there are complications that prevent all female writers from belonging, clearly, to one side or the other and that the attempt to organize and divide women into opposing teams is an effect of our present reading strategies which are shaped by our anxieties about gender and identity, antagonistic approaches to subservient women and our need to forge a strident ‘feminist’ Romanticism. These complexities stem from or, at least, congregate in the ‘crisis’ of the female body.

Virginia Woolf employs the language of the body in her brief essay on Sara Coleridge. It should have been given a title that reflects its content which dwells on the men in Sara’s life. She begins, “Coleridge also left children of his body. One, his daughter, Sara, was a continuation of him, not of his flesh indeed, for she was minute, ethereal, but of his mind, his temperament” (Woolf 73). Certainly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his daughter shared an affinity for words and abstract thought; however, Woolf’s narrow-minded approach to Sara is unfair. But really she had no choice. In order to formulate a feminist identity and movement, feminists must sacrifice the other,

subservient women; they must assemble the opposition, which will serve as their contrasting image -- an infuriating one. Woolf even uses "pathetically" to describe Sara's wish that she be given "three years respite from childbearing," which only reveals Woolf's distaste of the prevalent female circumstances of the period (Woolf 76). Her analysis of Sara is melodramatically metaphorical; in fact, she often goes too far and must, then, quickly qualify her statements, which would otherwise sound ridiculous. After introducing an image of the body, she writes, "Sara was a continuation of him," insinuating that she was not a whole woman and that she did not own or control her self, but that she was a mere appendage to her father. To argue that Sara Coleridge is a half-person, a deformed, stunted, "unfinished" child of a "great man" reveals our failure as contemporary critics to recognize the distinct contributions offered by the less politically prominent post-Romantic female writers.

However, part of this problem issues from Woolf's prejudices, as a prolific creative writer, towards the distinct functions of the editor, for whom she shows little respect. Woolf describes Sara as "a fertilizer, not a creator, a burrowing, tunneling reader, throwing up molehills as she read her way through" (Woolf 77). She resorts to dehumanizing Sara twice in her essay, reducing her to both a "toad" and a "mole" (fairy does not seem such a bad option in comparison) (77). Commenting on Sara's role as editor of her father's work, Woolf writes, "much of it was not self-sacrifice, but self-realization," and with this I agree. However, she warps this comment, which could have celebrated Sara's commitment to empowering work and the intellectual affiliation she forged with her father's words. Woolf cannot resist succumbing to sensationalism. "She

found her father, in those blurred pages, as she had not found him in the flesh,” Woolf writes, her talent as a novelist shining through, “and she found that he was herself” (Woolf 76).

Erasing Sara’s individuality, Woolf’s comments dissuade from further analysis, especially considering Woolf’s considerable influence as a modern feminist critic. In melding father and daughter into one subject, she insinuates that after studying Samuel Taylor Coleridge, it would be redundant to examine his daughter (aside from complaining about her femininity and comparing her to various small animals). Sara is a daughter, as all women are; she is, therefore, not physically conjoined to her father. To suggest this is pure absurdity, veiled in literary criticism. She merely inherited a way of thinking, a way of living, expressions, mannerisms and a psychological makeup, a nose perhaps, as every child does. Woolf speaks about Sara as a “shadow,” as a “chequered, dappled figure” never generating her own light, but hidden or diluted by the colour of her father’s life. Woolf sees Sara Coleridge in terms of shadow, just as if she had the qualities of a fairy – fragile and ‘unpresent.’ So, since Sara has been made into these things, it is up to us to make her into something else. I can only hope that my additions will alter what I perceive as a rigid and artificial construction and form what could eventually be a collage, extending the boundaries of the fixed portrait (adding in, though, perhaps, to Sara’s horror, the body).

It should seem strange to us that a literary critic would use bodily metaphors to discuss a female writer, but instead, it is familiar, and has perhaps even become the language of this subject. Yet, it is for this reason that I hesitate to discuss the body in

relation to female fantasy writing. Julie Ellison begins *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding*, with a passage from *Biographia Literaria*.

The fairest part of the most beautiful body will appear deformed and monstrous, if dissevered from its organic Whole. Nay, on delicate subjects, where a seemingly trifling difference of more or less may constitute a difference in *kind*, even a *faithful* display of the main and supporting ideas, if yet they are separated from the forms by which they are at once clothed and modified, may perchance present a skeleton indeed; but a skeleton to alarm and deter. (233-34)

In employing this epigraph, Ellison is able to point to the unnerving use of the body metaphor in Romantic literature and indicate Samuel Taylor Coleridge's interpretive anxieties. Clearly, certain metaphorical uses of the female body are dubious, particularly those which invoke a sense of violence, as Coleridge's does. In considering Ellison's use of this excerpt from *Biographia Literaria*, it is useful to consider Elizabeth Grosz's comments about the problematic nature of her own study, *Volatile Bodies*, which "hovers close to patriarchal conceptions of the body" (Grosz 124). Her return to the body, to the site where misogyny seeks to justify the "natural inequality" of women (their "fragility, unreliability, biological closeness to nature"), risks re-establishing masculine logic, yet it is a necessary act if we are to redeem the female body for use by female writers (Grosz xiv). The body cannot remain "an abyss, as unfathomable, lacking, enigmatic, veiled, seductive, voracious, dangerous, disruptive, but without name or place" (Grosz 124). The body must be accessible and available for female writers if we are to revolutionize female identity; and yet, we must wary and responsible about how we choose to characterize the female body, realizing that our tendency to metaphorize may have destructive repercussions that affect societal conceptions of gender.

Ellison's epigraph serves several functions in her text which extend beyond Samuel Taylor Coleridge's meaning. Within the context of her work on "gender" and "understanding," terms steeped in ethical complexities, she means for us to think about "analysis, method, logic, and system-formation...these modes of thought" (the work that is happening here) as producing the "beautiful body" of the "Whole" but as also committing violence against it (Ellison x). For Ellison, analysis and its associated procedures subject the "beautiful body," which is the "feminine body of understanding," to a violence, a "gothic transformation" that leaves it "deformed and monstrous," a "skeleton to alarm and deter" (Ellison x). Ellison's inclusion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's words seems ironic when used in this study because Sara Coleridge is, perhaps, the quintessential "beautiful body." The erudite daughter of three literary fathers, Sara consists of the very "analysis, method, logic, and system-formation," which has and continues to violate and deform her -- a "filial phenomenon" (the term Sara uses to describe her editing) and the product of an invasive male Romanticism. Yet, the warning embedded in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's metaphor of the body is directed to the readers and critics of his creations. The "skeleton, to alarm and deter" stands upright in his passage, perhaps a premonition of his daughter's deformed, historicized 'body' of work. It could be argued that Sara's work as a female Romantic, as well as her character itself, has not been considered in relation to the "organic Whole," which constitutes her identity. She has not been separated from the "body of her father's writings," an image that, while referring to the bulk or quantity of her father's work, involves the connotations of skin, limbs and even, disturbingly, corpse. Sara has not been able to exist

as a separate literary figure, 'fleshed out' by the fluxes and refluxes of the Romantic milieu, which was a fundamentally different experience for female writers.

Sara Coleridge would have been embarrassed by any impulse to "write the body" and probably had no thought of incorporating the body into her intellectual writing. Kathleen Jones relates Sara's frustration in *A Passionate Sisterhood*, explaining that while writing her fairy tale, she "encountered that other demon of women's writing, the rock against which so many productions were shattered. She found that it was not possible for her to 'write the body,'" to include her biology and sexuality, which could explain the lack of bodily imagery in the fairy tale (Jones 250). The ethereal landscape of the fairy tale genre enabled her to distance herself from the corporeal realities of what was often a weak and failing vessel -- to dissolve her flesh and live in a world completely controlled by the mind. She denied her body entry into her words. Jones names the female body "that other demon" and "a rock," images that depict the body as a reviled, foreign form. Inextricably related to, yet estranged from her, it is a feared and destructive part of woman which interferes with the mind. For Griggs, it seems even to be the source of "feminine bias," which impairs the intellect (Griggs 106). Sara's notions about her body are similar to those of Sylvia Plath who recalls that moment when the "sex-organs develop and call loud to the flesh," assigning the experience a sense of perversity by juxtaposing this image with clean and 'feminine' "fairy queens...virginal maidens...slim-limbed flower spirits" (Bernheimer viii). Both women associate their corporeal forms with mess, disgust and an overwhelming sense of shame. Kathleen Jones reveals Sara's alienation from her body and her reticence about sexuality, recounting an incident

involving her notebook. She gave her collection of poignant quotations to Henry and he responded, annotating the entries with marginal notes, adding in a love sonnet, "...a tongue of lambent flames which speaks to Sex...". He made an attempt to inject passion into her pages of notes but this was at odds with "Sara's view of love as a high-minded, spiritual affection," which for Henry was "not human." In fact, her perceptions about love, he said, "falsely deny the body and its needs" (Jones 211). Although he hoped, after returning it to her, that she would use the notebook as a "confessional," she never wrote in it again, but tore out pages he had added and crossed out his words, displaying an awkward hostility. Henry's thoughts about sex and the body were perceived as intrusions into her intimate book of ideas -- a separate, pure and intellectual space, unencumbered by the body.

The passages in her *Memoir and Letters* in which she does consider the body (although antiseptically), oscillate, at once rejecting the "separability of the *real* body and the soul -- the arbitrary notion of man as a mixture of heterogeneous components" and demonstrating a hierarchical understanding of mind and body: we know, she writes, "that our fleshly case is not a part of ourselves" (*Memoir and Letters* 245). Sara interjects her own thoughts here, demonstrating her anxieties about the body and nonchalantly stating the 'truth' ("knowing, as we do,"), that we are fractured subjects -- innately estranged from our bodies, which are inanimate "cases," as though made of glass. Samuel Taylor Coleridge contradicts himself in his partly intellectual, partly poetic (but wholly distanced) explanation of the body.

It is not true that body plus soul makes man. Man is not the syntheton or composition of body and soul, as the two component units. No -- man is the unit,

the prothesis, and body and soul are the two poles, the positive and negative, the thesis and antithesis of the man, even as attraction and repulsion are the two poles in and by which one and the same magnet manifests itself. (*Memoir and Letters* 245)

Although he initially attempts to eradicate the duality associated with the body and mind, he undermines his intentions by evoking a sense of antagonism, which suggests division and conflict within the “unit, the prothesis” of man. He compares the body and soul to “two poles,” one positive and the other negative, which sustain (by the balancing pull of “attraction” and “repulsion”) the magnet, which is man. These two words are morally coded and reveal the pervading perspective of this period -- that bodily life was corrupt. Entrenched in religious beliefs and academically versed in its literature, Sara’s rejection of her own body follows this religious dichotomy, which elevates mind over body; and yet, her rejection appears to extend beyond the intended limits of religion. She ends these passages, resolving them with a disbelief in the promise of redemption; “the belief that the future world of man is this world reformed, exalted and purified, is one which I can not reconcile with reason” (*Memoir and Letters* 246). It appears that in convincing Sara of the imperfect and immoral condition of the body, the Christian religion defeated its own intention, which is to stress the benefits of Christianity, most prominently, the possibility of an afterlife. For Sara Coleridge, the body was, perhaps, too corrupt ever to be resurrected. Her father asks, “What sort of flesh and blood would incorruptible flesh and blood be? [The kind belonging to fairies?] As well might speak of marble flesh and blood” (*Memoirs and Letters* 244).

In 1836 Sara wrote, “I reject all those burning expressions which suggest themselves to my mind in crowds and will endeavor to write only at the dictation of that

highest mind which has nothing in common with the body. O who will deliver me from this body of death!" (*Memoir and Letters* 87). This passage is unclear because it implies with its phrase, "suggest themselves to my mind in crowds," that either Sara was influenced to 'write the body' by the radical 'feminist' thinkers of the period or that she, herself, was partly inclined to do so (to liberate herself from the body she considered her own fleshly prison). Inspired by Hebraism, "this death which the body is," Sara's despairing question originates in a belief that the body is corrupt and waste, notions encouraged by her experiences of pregnancy, miscarriage, depression, drug addiction and ultimately breast cancer (*Memoir and Letters* 244). We need to think about how it is that words and bodies converge in post-Romantic literature, but we must also consider the spaces that are forged between them and think about the origins of Sara Coleridge's voice, the "dictation of that highest mind," which influences the way that women perceive and write about themselves. Perhaps this has to do with the idea that the body itself is discourse, although discourse suggests a sense of fluidity, of discussion and compromise, when this body should instead be associated with a sense of conceptual stillness, stagnancy even, "a body of death."

It surprised me to encounter in one of Sara's letters the phrase, "write the body," which I had come to associate such twentieth-century criticism as Helene Cixous' who employs the body as a metaphor for the feminine text in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in which she envisions how through writing the text of the self, woman will emerge from the prison of her theoretical existence. In doing so, Cixous recreates the notion of the body, portraying woman as an undefinable *being* -- "naked and nameless" (Cixous 210).

Yet, for Sara Coleridge (whom I imagine Cixous would perceive as a captive of the “phallogocentric system,” a woman indoctrinated -- fed into and nourished by -- the “enormous machine” that has been churning out “truth for centuries,”) the female body cannot be (re)written and (re)conceived in words because for the conservative, Romantic female subject the female body is composed of masculine logic (Cixous 202-4).

Although I disagree with Mudge’s interpretation of Sara’s illness as a consciously manifested phenomenon, which enabled her literary ambitions, I do believe that her psychological and physical ailments provided her with a unique and profound perspective. Julia Kristeva’s thoughts about melancholia and creativity could be helpful here (Mudge 63). There is a particular clarity associated with acts of writing conceived within the melancholic state. As Jones reveals, Sara’s psychological state during the time she wrote *Phantasmion* was volatile and precarious. Living the effects of “night terrors” and an addiction to “laudanum,” “the fears and phantoms of her mind were spilled onto paper in a fantastic tale, ‘a string of waking dreams’” (Jones 250). I find Mudge’s argument patronizing because she suggests that Sara’s illness “restructured the domestic hierarchy so as to privilege the invalid...exempting her from required duties.” Although the Romantic period witnessed the increasing phenomenon of female, psychological illness, illness should hardly be regarded as a subversive act (Mudge insists that it “was the safest form of protest and the most dangerous”) (Mudge 63). Sara’s condition, and, therefore, also her perspective were cultivated by patriarchal culture which suppressed women -- a suppression that induced nervousness, hysteria and, perhaps, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman In the Attic* (1979), an “anger -- that if

repressed or turned back against the woman -- could also produce female masochism, depression or madness” (Mellor 4). In undertaking this study, I have uncovered evidence of masochism and misogyny, which suggest that Sara was, in fact, repressing her hostilities towards patriarchy and its masculine logic, which had become a part of her working intellect. Sara’s refusal to ‘write the body’ signifies what in *Black Sun*, Kristeva calls a “living death”; a patient’s body is described as being “already elsewhere, absent, a living corpse. It often happens that she does not feed it or else, on the contrary, she stuffs it the better to get rid of it” (Kristeva 74). The body, psychological illness and fantasy writing merge here in the notion of disembodied, subversive action. *Phantasmion* allowed Sara the context in which she could subversively explore alternative modes of sexual identity and experience, unencumbered by her female body. And so the fairy tale, which appeared to belong to the young, male character and his adventures in self-discovery, becomes a woman’s genre. Not merely a maternal act of guidance, it became a stage on which the female subject assumes the mutability of costume -- the “stage where the road passes over the rim of our world. No one’s eyes can see very far beyond that” (Jasper xxi).

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have attempted to argue that critics have both disregarded and misunderstood Sara Coleridge's literary contributions. *Phantasmion* stands, a veiled monument to the poetic genius of a different kind of female Romantic poet. A less politically prominent writer than some of her nineteenth century sisters, Sara appears to have no place in literary history, apart from her role as daughter and "literary executor" of her father's "literary remains" (Robinson 117). Not blatantly revolutionary, she remains an unattractive mascot for contemporary feminist critics whose task it is to forge a new feminine Romanticism. Sara Coleridge's voice is quiet, even domesticated and maternal. And yet, to categorize her in these ways is to risk further misrepresentation. Neither is she a pacifist nor a madwoman caught in the proverbial attic.

I have attempted to stress the need to redefine our normative conceptions of the fairy tale genre and maternal literature, which are tainted by misconceptions that work to undermine the literary and political significance of fantasy writing. We must "wonder about wonder" (Bernheimer xx). Sara Coleridge's use of the fairy tale genre signifies a simultaneously traditional and yet subversive act of writing that attempts to explore alternative modes of gendered identity and experience. Disengaged from the restraints of the body, female identity becomes malleable, perhaps even kaleidoscopic. The mirror of fantasy, a metaphor for the female quest for identity, offered Sara Coleridge the theatrical

space to reconstruct and ‘play’ with her notions of self. At odds with singularity, the excess of fantasy works to eradicate the portrait that “one look portrays” and reveal the often frightening, unjust, beautiful, inspiring and, through the portholes of history and fiction, endless and enriching nature of being (*Memoir and Letters ix*).

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