
Jeffrey W. Barbeau’s latest publication, *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought*, is the most recent work in a burgeoning field of criticism on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s daughter. Barbeau’s study follows on from Peter Swaab’s collections of her poetry (*Collected Poems*, Carcanet Press, 2007) and prose (*The Regions of Sara Coleridge’s Thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as biographies by Bradford Keyes Mudge (*Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter*, Yale University Press, 1989), Kathleen Jones (*A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets*, Constable, 1997) and Katie Waldegrave (*The Poets’ Daughters: Dora Wordsworth and Sara Coleridge*, Windmill Books, 2013). This recent wealth of publications indicates the fascination that Sara Coleridge’s life is beginning to generate, but Barbeau’s study goes beyond the biographical. Here, Sara’s biographical details are used as a way of exposing the nuances of her complex literary and theological thought. Barbeau provides the first sustained examination of Sara as an important nineteenth-century intellectual in her own right.

This study adopts a roughly chronological approach which allows Barbeau to emphasise the impact of Sara’s biography on her intellectual development. Nonetheless, that his main concern is the growth of Sara’s mind is indicated by the thematic chapter titles, which suggest a guide to Sara’s construction of herself as a critic: Beauty, Education, Dreams, Criticism, Authority, Reason, Regeneration, Community and Death. This growth was, inevitably, bound up with her relationship with her father, and, in many ways more importantly, with his publications; Barbeau asserts that Sara was ‘the single-most important individual in the preservation of [Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s] legacy as one of the great intellectuals in English history’ (p. 1). Barbeau demonstrates how Sara’s editorial work on her father’s writings ‘served as a tutorial in her father’s thinking and allowed Sara to develop a thoroughly Coleridgean frame of mind’ (pp. ix–x). That is not to say, however, that Sara was ‘slavishly indebted’ to her father’s thought (p. 23); in fact, she developed Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s system and applied it in innovative ways to the social, political and theological issues of the early Victorian era. Although she ‘barely knew’ her father, after his death—and especially after the death of her husband Henry, STC’s first editor—Sara ‘claim[ed] singular authority to interpret his works and […] privately develop his thought for the needs of a new generation’ (p. 70).

One of the problems with Sara Coleridge with regards to modern academic thought continues to be the disparity between her formidable intellectual capa-
bilities and her consistent avowals of a belief that a woman’s place should remain in the home or, at least, under the supervision or protection of a male relative (p. 83). Barbeau builds upon arguments put forward by Alan Vardy and Donelle Ruwe, who have suggested that Sara’s editorial work allowed her to express her original ideas in a public forum without compromising her belief that women should remain in the private sphere. Barbeau expands upon these previous works by revealing their impact on Sara’s (largely unpublished) essays on a diverse range of nineteenth-century thinkers, from F. D. Morris to Wesley and Carlyle. He discovers a writer and thinker who maintained an active social and intellectual engagement with many of the most influential figures of the day in a way which challenges Sara’s construction of herself as an intensely private individual.

Nevertheless, Barbeau does not discount or belittle the importance of domesticity to Sara’s own systems. In fact, he uncovers the ways in which Sara’s employments at home—particularly the education of her children—informed the development of several of her most important ideas. Sara’s pedagogical theories, like her later theological ones, reflected her rejection of the commonly-held view that external, contextual influences were the primary factors in an individual’s development. Instead, Sara ‘envisioned a scheme—for her children and others—that placed the accent on interiority and development ab intra (from within)’ (p. 31). Barbeau finds this approach reflected in Sara’s two autonomous publications, Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children (1834) and Phantasmion (1837). Sara’s collection of didactic poems articulate the importance of subjective perception in interactions with the world; Barbeau perceptively suggests that the problematic poem ‘Poppies’ ‘fits quite well with Sara’s view of education’ because it demonstrates the importance of private associations on the construction of external objects (p. 42). Similarly, Sara’s fairy tale evinces her struggle to ‘work out a philosophy of the relationship between the mind and body’ (p. 52) and the natural world (p. 63). These works take the poetic systems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey and modify them to suit Sara’s own creative intent (p. 35).

Barbeau’s most important contribution is his extension of the limited work on Sara’s theological thought. Barbeau seeks to ‘establish the heart of Sara Coleridge’s theological agenda and develop her unique—and previously unrecognized—contribution to the history of nineteenth-century theology’ (p. 112). Since Earl Leslie Griggs’s damning dismissal of Sara’s essay ‘On Rationalism’, scholars have tended to ignore her contributions to mid-nineteenth century theological debates. Barbeau observes that Sara was in an unusual position for a woman in her time: the advanced education she received in the Southey household stood her in good stead for her later involvement with discussions surrounding the Oxford Movement. Sara’s engagements with these debates reveal her capacity for intense and sustained argument in a way which, as Barbeau asserts, would have eluded her father. He singles out Sara’s ‘doctrine of regeneration’ as ‘the single-most important idea in Sara Coleridge’s literary corpus’ (p. 130). Barbeau unpacks this complex theory with extensive reference to contemporary ecclesiastical issues, and indicates how
regeneration affected Sara’s intellectual and creative relationships, both with her precursors and contemporaries.

Barbeau concludes that ‘one of the most remarkable aspects of [Sara’s] life is how much she accomplished through years of depression, physical ailments, and dependence on narcotics’ (p. 177). In a similar vein, one of the remarkable aspects of this study is its consistent unveiling of the ways in which Sara’s personal troubles of both body and mind, not to mention family relations, were essential to the development of an independent and complex intellectual system. Barbeau convincingly reveals the importance of Sara Coleridge to mid-Victorian literary circles, and asserts the need to re-evaluate her position within nineteenth-century intellectual life. This study, long overdue, demonstrates Sara Coleridge’s serious contributions to Victorian thinking. Barbeau establishes Sara as an underrepresented key figure, one who deserves more attention as a scholar and thinker in her own right, and outside of the shadow of her more famous father.

Notes

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In her excellent essay on the dramatist Joanna Baillie, Louise Duckling quotes Lord Byron reflecting on Voltaire’s assertion that “the composition of a tragedy required testicles”—If this be true, Byron writes, ‘Lord knows what Joanna Baillie does—I suppose she borrows them’ (p. 153). One of the striking features of Byron’s backhanded compliment is his failure to consider female creativity in its own terms, outside of a distinctly masculinist mode of literary production. The essays in this volume draw upon a rich tradition of feminist scholarship that, in contrast to Lord Byron, has identified and explored what Teresa Barnard terms ‘the female view of the intellectual world’ (p. 6). Barnard’s
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