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Coleridge and Shakespeare

Charles Mahoney

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the role of Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a critic of William Shakespeare. It discusses the loss of Coleridge's notebook for the *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry*, which made it difficult to accurately assess his criticism on Shakespeare. The article suggests that the innovations of Coleridge's criticism came out of the depths of his own mind and years of thinking on the principles of poetry, while his close reading of Shakespeare provided him with the necessary figures, accidents, and minutiae to substantiate his claims.

Keywords: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Shakespeare, Principles of Poetry, Lectures, criticism

An endless activity of Thought, in all the possible associations of Thought with Thought, Thought with Feelings, or with words, or of Feelings with Feelings, & words with words—

(*CN III*, 3246 (1808))

Whenever I am reading Shakespear, scarce three pages together can I read but spite of myself I sink back in my Chair, & and cannot go on for the fullness, the overflowingness of Thought & Feeling awakened by the last or by some passage that throws a Light on all the Past—

(‘On Reading Shakespeare’ [1813], *SW&F I*, 345)

WALKING from his lodgings on the Strand to the Royal Institution on 30 March 1808, on the way to deliver the third of his *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry*, Coleridge had his pocket picked, and thereby lost most of his notes for the lecture. Or so he said. Though De Quincey and others corroborated this claim,¹ it is nonetheless almost too good, too Coleridgean to be true—as if the Man from Porlock or the writer of the ‘judicious letter’ in

chapter 13 of the *Biographia* had suddenly materialized to derail another promising Coleridgean scheme. In poor health and perilous financial straits, Coleridge had been invited by Humphry Davy (p. 499) to deliver a course of 25 lectures, for which he was to be paid £140, only to lose his notebook on the evening of the third lecture and thus resume more-or-less extemporaneously. Though such an account may make the 1808 lectures sound like but another Coleridgean fragment, the story of Coleridge's lost notebook is in fact of far more than merely anecdotal interest, for it draws our attention to many of the abiding difficulties attendant upon any attempt to evaluate Coleridge's role as a critic of Shakespeare. In the notes that do remain for this lecture, Coleridge instructs himself at one point to 'read from Pocket book' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 67), which of course he cannot do—just as his own readers cannot even now turn to one integrated, canonical account of Coleridge's criticisms of Shakespeare.² Though this criticism is certainly not lost to us, neither is it immediately accessible, scattered as it is over notes for lectures (there is not a complete text for even one of Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare), observations collected in the *Table Talk*, marginalia in his various editions of Shakespeare, sundry comments in his letters, numerous notebook entries, and two brief publications assembled from lecture notes (chapter 15 of the *Biographia* [1817] and an excerpt from the 'Essay on the Principles of Method', written for *The Friend* [1818]). Coleridge's lost pocket book, it would appear, presents only too apt a figure for the loss at which readers of Coleridge may find themselves when they attempt to assemble a coherent account of his criticisms of Shakespeare.

Between 1808 and 1819, Coleridge offered a total of eight courses of lectures which were either wholly or partially devoted to considerations of Shakespeare.³ Of these, the most significant were arguably the first series of 1808 (*Lectures on the Principles of Poetry*), which established much of the critical lexicon and many of the general principles to which Coleridge would return for the next eleven years; the 1811-12 series (*Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*), for which the most detailed accounts remain (courtesy of the notes and letters of John Payne Collier, Henry Crabb Robinson, and J. Tomalin), the 1813 series in Bristol (*Lectures on Shakespeare and Education*), which most prominently reflects the influence of August Wilhelm Schlegel; and the late series of 1818-19 (*Lectures on Shakespeare*), with its new (p. 500) attention to what Coleridge had come to denominate 'particular and practical criticism'.⁴

Though the lectures are not the only way to negotiate Coleridge's criticisms of Shakespeare, they provide a coherent narrative around which to organize an account of what many have found to be not merely the most important Romantic criticism of Shakespeare, but the most dynamic, influential analysis of Shakespeare between Samuel Johnson and A. C. Bradley—if not the most indispensable criticism of Shakespeare in English.⁵ It is in the lectures that Shakespeare is celebrated as 'the myriad-minded man' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 112), as the Protean poet 'who now flowed, a river; now raged, a fire; now roared, a lion' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 225). It is here as well that Iago's Act I soliloquy ('Thus do I ever make my fool my purse') is famously characterized as 'the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 315), and Hamlet is said to be 'a man living in meditation..., continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve' (*Lects* 1808-19

(CC) I, 390).⁶ As unsystematic as it may be, part of the impact of this criticism derives from the fact that so many of the larger critical insights for which Coleridge is justly celebrated find their initial formulation in his lectures on Shakespeare. For example, when in the *Biographia* Coleridge defines 'poetic faith' as 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment' (*BL* (CC) II, 6), he may be heard to be drawing on notes for the 1808 lecture series, where he writes of stage presentations that they 'are to produce a sort of temporary Half-Faith, which the Spectator encourages in himself & supports by a voluntary contribution on his own part, because he knows that it is at all times in his power to see the thing as it really is' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) 1,134).⁷ Similarly, when Coleridge later argues that for any poet to be celebrated for genuine poetic power, he must demonstrate 'multeity'—Coleridge's term for the 'power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling' (*BL* (CC) II, 20)—he again draws on notes from the lectures of 1808, where he defines poetic beauty as 'a pleasurable sense of the Many... reduced to unity by the correspondence of all the component parts to each other & the reference of all to one central Point' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 35).⁸ Such (p. 501) instances abound. Whatever their announced topic, the literary lectures were principally concerned with Shakespeare.⁹ And it was in thinking, writing, and lecturing about Shakespeare that Coleridge came to formulate the opinions on poetry that inform not merely *Biographia Literaria* but also the 'Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism' (*SW&F* I, (CC) 353–86), the 'Treatise on Method' (*SW&F* I, (CC) 625–86), and the oracular pronouncements collected in *Table Talk*.

Though he was not approached by Davy to lecture at the Royal Institution until 1806, Coleridge appears to have been thinking about a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's plays as early as 1804, under the aegis of a wide-ranging consideration of morality and English literature with Shakespeare as the centerpiece. In a letter to Sir George Beaumont from February, 1804, Coleridge outlines a plan which in both its general concerns and its specific procedures bears startling resemblance to his eventual treatment of Shakespeare over the course of his lectures between 1808 and 1819:

In explaining what I shall do with Shakespere I explain the nature of the other five. Each scene of each play I read, as if it were the whole of Shakespere's Works—the sole thing extant. I ask myself what are the characteristics—the Diction, the Cadences, and Metre, the character, the passion, the moral or metaphysical Inherencies, & fitness for theatric effect, and in what sort of Theatres—all these I write down with great care & precision of Thought & Language—and when I have gone thro' the whole, I then shall collect my papers, & observe, how often such & such Expressions recur & thus shall not only know what the Characteristics of Shakespere's Plays are, but likewise what proportion they bear to each other. Then, not carelessly tho' of course with far less care I shall read thro' the old Plays, just before Shakespere's Time, Sir Phillip Sidney's *Arcadia*—Ben Johnson [sic], Beaumont & Fletcher, & Massinger in the same way—so as to see & to be able to prove what of Shakespere belonged to his Age, & was common to all the *first-rate* men of that true Saeculum aureum of English Poetry, and what is his

own, & his only—Thus I shall both exhibit the characteristics of the Plays—& of the mind—of Shakespere... (CL II 1054)¹⁰

Reading each scene as if it were the whole not merely of the play but of Shakespeare's entire *oeuvre*, Coleridge aspires to balance the local insight with the general observation, anticipating the synecdochic reading strategy he would develop in the 1810s, in which he put a great deal of pressure on the opening scenes as representative of the 'judgement with which Shakespear always in his first scenes prepares, & yet how naturally & with what a concealment of art, for the Catastrophe—how he presents the *germ* of all the after events' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,559). Enumerating the 'characteristics' of Shakespeare's plays, Coleridge attends to (p. 502) matters as seemingly minute as diction, cadence, and metre, as all-encompassing as 'moral or metaphysical Inherencies', as imaginative as character and passion, as dramaturgical as a play's 'fitness for theatric effect', and as historical as Shakespeare's relation to the Elizabethans—all concerns of his later analyses of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's diction is a constant preoccupation of Coleridge's, and nowhere is it more apparent than in Coleridge's marginalia in his various editions of Shakespeare, such as when he observes of Mercutio's last words in *Romeo and Juliet*, 'The wit and raillery habitual to Mercutio struggling with the pain giving so fine an effect to Romeo's Speech, & the whole so completely justifying him' (*M* (CC) IV, 832). Coleridge's attention to metre also manifests itself throughout his marginalia, such as in his list of simple and composite feet in his copy of Theobald's *The Works of Shakespeare* (*M* (CC) IV, 686-7) or in his claim that 'Shakespeare never introduces a catalectic line without intending an equivalent to the foot omitted in the pauses, or the dwelling emphasis, or the diffused retardation' (*M* (CC) IV, 844). Such detailed observations—or what Coleridge termed 'hypercriticism'—correspond throughout this period with his conviction as to 'how little instructive any criticism can be which does not enter into minutiae' (*CN* III, 3970).

Under the heading of 'moral or metaphysical Inherencies' Coleridge maybe seen to organize three possibilities: the relation (the relative 'grossness' or high-mindedness) of Shakespeare's manners and morality to that of other Renaissance dramatists (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 521-2); the moral disposition of a play, such as in his criticisms of *Measure for Measure* for being 'degrading to the character of Woman' (*M* (CC) IV, 693); or the 'moral conceptions' that inform his depictions of character, such as in his observations regarding 'the innocent mind of Othello plunged by its own unsuspecting and therefore unwatchful confidence, in guilt and misery not to be endured' (*SW&F* (CC) I, 655). Closely related to Coleridge's interest in moral inherencies and conceptions is his exploration of the 'psychological', a new term at the time which Coleridge deploys to denominate a method both of organizing Shakespeare's works psychologically rather than historically ('flow[ing] from the progress & order of his mind'; *Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 253) and of describing his development of dramatic character in terms of 'psychologic portraiture' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,126).¹¹ Integral to such portraiture is Coleridge's conviction that Shakespeare develops his characters not from observation but from meditation; thus it may be said that they are not copies so much as imitations. As he writes in a letter dating from 1802, 'It is easy to cloathe Imaginary Beings with our own Thoughts & Feelings; but to send ourselves out of ourselves, to *think* ourselves in to the Thoughts and Feelings of Beings in circumstances wholly and strangely different from our own / hoc labor, hoc (p. 503) opus /

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and who has atchieved it? Perhaps only Shakespere' (*CL* II, 810). Coleridge's construction of Shakespeare as the Protean poet *par excellence* is predicated upon a conviction of precisely this ability to send himself out of himself, thus 'becom[ing] by power of Imagination another Thing' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 69).

Coleridge's attention to 'fitness for theatric effect' has less to do with dramaturgy and matters of staging than with what he terms Shakespeare's judgement, or his ability to construct and arrange his plays in accord with the limitations of 'poetic faith' and the demands of 'taste'. Coleridge is concerned in this regard to demonstrate that Shakespeare's judgement (his powers of discrimination and arrangement) was equal to his genius (understood in this context as the power of execution), that Shakespeare was not a 'delightful Monster—wild indeed, without taste or Judgement' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 79) but, rather, a deliberate, meditative poet, one whose work 'gave proof of a most profound, energetic & philosophical mind' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 82).¹² In making this argument, Coleridge seeks to overturn two commonplaces of eighteenth-century criticism: not merely that Shakespeare was 'an ignorant man, a child of nature, a wild genius, a strange medley' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 274-5), but also that the age of Elizabeth was one in which England was struggling to define itself against the darkness, chaos, and relative barbarity of its own past. Rather, according to Coleridge, the reign of Elizabeth witnessed 'a great activity of mind and a passion for thinking & making words to express the objects of thought & invention' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 287-8), produced such men of genius as Edmund Spenser and Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh and Lord Bacon, and was in this regard 'favourable to the existence & full developement of Shakespeare' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 287). And it is in this context that Coleridge constantly attempts to adjudicate 'what of Shakespere belonged to his Age ... and what is his own, & his only'.

Coleridge's 1804 letter to Beaumont thus serves as a prologue of sorts to his later, professional interest in Shakespeare over the course of his lectures, and underscores at the outset his multifaceted reading strategies—his attention to textual minutiae as well as historical speculation, to his own critical vocabulary as well as Shakespeare's individual lexicon, to the particular as well as the universal. Appropriate to the first act of one of Shakespeare's plays, it 'presents the *germ* of all the after events' and prompts us to read for a similar vocabulary of organic growth throughout the lectures.

Although not formally announced as a series of lectures on Shakespeare, the 1808 lectures appear to have been conceived of in Shakespearean terms. As Coleridge wrote to Davy, after introducing general, philosophical principles and the principles of poetry, he anticipated that he would then turn directly to 'the genius (p. 504) & writings of Shakespere, relatively to his Predecessors & Contemporaries, so as to determine not only his merits [and] defects, the proportion that each merit bears to the whole, but what of his merits & defects belong to his age, as being found in contemporaries of Genius, [and] what belong to himself' (*CL* III, 29-30). There remain detailed notes and records for the first four lectures.¹³ Of these, the first addresses the principles of taste (in relation to the principles of poetry), the second sketches the history of the drama before Shakespeare, the third examines Shakespeare's power as a poet, and the fourth initiates Coleridge's ex-

amination of Shakespeare as a dramatist. Although this may appear at first to be a disappointingly scant record, it nonetheless provides a crucial foundation for Coleridge's ensuing engagements with Shakespeare in at least three important ways: first, Coleridge's establishment of his own general principles and critical lexicon allows him to move increasingly from the general and abstract to the particular and descriptive in subsequent courses of lectures; second, his analysis of Shakespeare initially as a poet (and only subsequently as a dramatist) not only distinguishes his treatment from most eighteenth-century and Romantic critics,¹⁴ but also foregrounds his later, close readings of Shakespeare's language as decidedly literary (or as he will put it, 'practical') criticism; third, the materials for these lectures form the basis of Coleridge's best-known account of Shakespeare, the analysis of his poetic power in chapter 15 of *Biographia Literaria*.

Coleridge begins the first lecture with a long disquisition on taste, both in its primary sense (tasting a ragout, or mutton) and its metaphorical sense (having a taste for Milton or Shakespeare), in order then to define taste as

... a distinct Perception of any arrangement conceived as external to us co-[existent] with some degree of Dislike or Complacency conceived as resulting from that arrangement ... And in this Definition of Taste is involved the definition of the Fine Arts, as being such whose especial purpose is to gratify to the Taste—that is, not merely to adjoin but to combine and unite a sense of immediate pleasure in ourselves with the perception of external arrangement. (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 30)

Such a definition inflects 'taste' as a matter both of pleasure (complacency) and of judgement (perception—here, the ability 'to combine & unite a sense of immediate pleasure in ourselves with the perception of external arrangement' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 37)). Coleridge's point is twofold: to demonstrate the necessity of defining one's (p. 505) terms when those terms are so susceptible to being misunderstood and misapplied, and to establish the necessity of doing the same for 'beauty' ('generally admitted as the direct & peculiar Object of the Taste'; *Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 31), a term similarly susceptible to various inflections. When Coleridge eventually defines beauty as 'a pleasurable sense of the Many... reduced to unity by the correspondence of all the component parts to each other & the reference of all to one central Point' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,35), he once again incorporates the criteria of pleasure and judgement. Although Shakespeare is nowhere mentioned by name in this first lecture, Coleridge's definitions here make possible numerous later arguments he will make regarding Shakespeare's judgement in relation to his genius. In other words, if Shakespeare gratifies the taste of his readers, it is not merely because of his imagination and inventiveness (genius) but also because of his ability to select and arrange his materials in reference to one central point or principle (judgement)—to 'present a Whole to us combined with a consciousness of its parts' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,35).

The third and fourth lectures of the 1808 series are similarly critical to our understanding of several larger terms and themes—in this case not only Shakespeare's 'power' as a poet, but also Coleridge's important distinctions between and definitions of fancy and the imagination, which he would later rework in chapters 12 and 13 of the *Biographia*. Drawing repeatedly upon *Venus and Adonis*, Coleridge argues in both lectures that 'Shakespeare appears—from his poems alone, apart from his great works—to have possessed all the conditions of a true Poet' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,78) due to his numerous 'powers',

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prominent amongst which is that protean ability 'to become by power of Imagination another thing' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 69). In addition, 'fancy' here names 'the aggregative Power... the bringing together Images dissimilar in the main by some one point or more of Likeness' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 67), while 'imagination' names the 'power of modifying one image or feeling by the precedent or following ones' as a result of which 'many circumstances [combine] into one moment of thought to produce that ultimate end of human Thought, and human Feeling, Unity' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 68), or 'the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, & by a sort of *fusion to force many into one*' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 81).¹⁵ The absolute essential of poetry, according to Coleridge, is 'to make every thing present by a Series of Images' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 68), which he illustrates with reference to Wordsworth's lyric 'I wandered lonely as a cloud',¹⁶ and to one couplet in *Venus and Adonis*, 'Look! how a bright star shooteth from the Sky, / So glides he in the night from Venus' Eye' (lines (p. 506) 815-16).

Consistent with his conclusions in the 1808 series, Coleridge continues to argue in his 1811-12 lectures that Shakespeare must be understood as a 'two-fold Being ... the Poet & the Philosopher', and that he availed himself of it 'to convey profound Truths in the most lively Images, and yet the whole faithful to the character supposed to utter the lines & a further development of that character' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 267). What is new in these lectures is Coleridge's detailed attention to Shakespeare's characters, as is evident above (an observation made apropos *Love's Labour Lost*, which Coleridge believed to have been Shakespeare's first play) as well as in the prospectus to the course of fifteen lectures on Shakespeare and Milton which Coleridge initiated in November 1811, where he promises 'a philosophic Analysis and Explanation of all the principal *Characters* of our great Dramatist' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 179), including Othello, Falstaff, Richard III, Iago, and Hamlet. Though he did not begin really to analyse characters until the seventh lecture, the notes and accounts which remain show Coleridge to have given a good deal of attention in the remaining lectures to characterization (Shakespeare's 'psychological genius' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 306)), dialogue, and plotting in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet*.

In the 1811-12 series of lectures, Coleridge proceeds first to *Romeo and Juliet*—not because it was among the earliest of Shakespeare's works, but because 'in it were to be found all his excellencies such as they afterwards appeared in his more perfect Dramas but differing from them in being less happily combined: all the parts were present but they were not united with the same harmony' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 303). The want of harmony here indicates a want of taste, or judgement, which Shakespeare will add once he has been 'disciplined by experience' and thus able to add 'to genius that talent by which he knows what part of his genius he can make intelligible to that part of mankind for whom he writes' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 304). Of far greater interest to Coleridge than the construction of the play is its characterization. Observing that the principal characters in *Romeo and Juliet* may be divided into two types—those which may be said to be 'representatives of classes which he had observed in society' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 318), and those which are clearly 'drawn rather from meditation than observation' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC) I*, 306)¹⁷—Coleridge cites Tybalt and Capulet as representative of the former:

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common characters under the sway of one particular passion who, though deserving of little interest in themselves, 'derive it from being instrumental in those situations in which the most important personages develop their thoughts & passions' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 305). And it is in developing such characters that Shakespeare explores 'all the minutiae of the human heart' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 306). Of an entirely different order is Mercutio, 'one of the truly Shakespearean (p. 507) characters' in that he was 'drawn rather from meditation than from observation, or rather by observation that was the child of meditation' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 306).

Hence it was that Shakespeare's favourite characters are full of such lively intellect. Mercutio was a man possessing all the elements of a Poet: high fancy; rapid thoughts: the whole world was as it were subject to his law of association: whenever he wished to impress anything, all things became his servants: all things told the same tale, and sound as it were in unison: this was combined with a perfect gentleman himself unconscious of his powers[.] It was by his Death contrived to bring about the whole catastrophe of the Play. It endears him to Romeo and gives to Mercutio's death an importance which it otherwise could not have acquired.

(*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 307).

Arguing that it is on the fate of a poet that the catastrophe depends, Coleridge simultaneously underscores Shakespeare's genius (his creation of such a lively poetic intellect in Mercutio)¹⁸ and his judgement (the connection of Mercutio's death with Romeo's resolve and consequent demise). As he concludes, 'Had not Mercutio been made so amiable and so interesting an object to every reader we could not have felt so strongly as we do the necessity of Romeo's interference or connecting it so passionately with the future fortunes of the lover & the Mistress' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,307).

Over the course of the remaining lectures in the 1811-12 series, Coleridge enters into extended considerations of *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet*. Of these, the detailed records of the lectures on *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* are of particular note. In the former, Coleridge makes an important distinction between Shakespeare's real and his ideal plays ('Shakespeare's plays might be separated into those where the real is disguised in the ideal & those where the ideal is hidden from us in the real' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 357)) before turning to *The Tempest* as representative of the ideal, as a play in which Shakespeare appeals to the imagination since 'the principal and only genuine excitement ought to come from within,—from the moved and sympathetic imagination' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 268-9). For Coleridge, the sympathetic imagination works hand-in-hand with what he repeatedly terms 'Poetic Faith[.] before which our common notions of philosophy give way' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,362). Poetic faith is voluntary—as he puts it famously in the *Biographia*, it is constituted by a 'willing suspension of disbelief' (*BL* (CC) II, 6)—and in *The Tempest* it may be seen to be at work in concert with Shakespeare's judgement, his preparation of the scene for such unreal possibilities as a supernatural tempest, an unflappable boatswain whose demeanor is 'perfect gallows', a marooned magician, an ethereal sprite, and a 'monster' who speaks in blank verse. Arguing again that Shakespeare's genius is integral to his judgement, Coleridge here locates that judgement in such moments as 'the admirable gradations by which the

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supernatural powers of *Prospero* were disclosed' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 369), (p. 508) and in the introduction of Ariel, at which point Shakespeare 'makes' the reader 'wish that if supernatural agency were employed it should be used for a being so lovely' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 362). Here, Shakespeare's preparation of the reader is a sign for Coleridge of his abiding judgement, while the reader's willingness to exert his imagination (a product of this preparation) is a sign of his own poetic faith. Indeed, the nebulous nature of Ariel represents precisely this poetic challenge, for he is sufficiently disembodied that both judgement and faith must work in concert: 'In air he lives, and from air he derives his being ... hence all that belongs to Ariel is all that belongs to the delight the mind can receive from external appearances abstracted from any inborn or [individual] purpose' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 363). And although Caliban seemingly represents a stark antithesis to Ariel, his introduction also represents for Coleridge another instance of Shakespeare's 'admirable judgement and preparation' and a similar challenge to poetic faith, for despite his brutish appearance he is still 'a noble being: a man in the sense of the imagination, all the images he utters are drawn from nature & are highly poetical; they fit in with the images of Ariel: Caliban gives you images from the Earth—Ariel images from the air' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 364–5). Thus it is that *The Tempest* emerges in Coleridge's reading as an exemplary test for his renewed sense of the operations of stage illusion, in relation to the spectator's 'poetic faith' on the one hand and the poet's judgement on the other.

With regard to *Hamlet*, Coleridge takes it upon himself to demonstrate Shakespeare's judgement in the introduction of the Ghost of Hamlet's father. As is the case in the dagger scene in *Macbeth*, 'the reader is totally divested of the notion that the vision is a figure in the <highly wrought> imagination' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 387), for neither Hamlet nor Macbeth is in any way morbidly preoccupied with the apparition he is about to witness. In Coleridge's words, 'How admirable is the judgment of the poet! Hamlet's own fancy has not conjured up the Ghost of his father: it has been seen by others: he is by them prepared to witness its appearance, & when he does see it he is not brought forward as having long brooded on the subject' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 386). Because the Ghost is not presented as a product of Hamlet's own distempered imagination, the reader is prepared to exert his imagination, his poetic faith, in countenancing it. Another potential challenge confronting the reader here is that of Hamlet's seeming indecision, his inconsistency, with regard to avenging the death of his father. According to Coleridge, however, 'There was no indecision about Hamlet' (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 387): he knew very well what it was incumbent upon him to do, and he continually resolved to do it. Yet as often as he resolved to act, just as often did he fail to do so. In Coleridge's reading, the entire play turns upon the call to action and the individual mind's response to this exhortation. Thus, in his concluding remarks, Coleridge dilates upon this dilemma in a way that, however obliquely, would appear to comment upon his own notorious irresolution:

(p. 509) Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth that action is the great end of existence—that no faculties of intellect however brilliant can be considered valuable, or otherwise than as misfortunes, if they withdraw us from or render us repugnant to action, and lead us to think and think of doing, until the time has es-

caped when we ought to have acted. In enforcing this truth Shakespeare has shewn the fulness, and force of his powers: all that is amiable and excellent in nature is combined in Hamlet, with the exception of this one quality: he is a man living in meditation, called upon <to act> by every motive human & divine but the great purpose of life defeated by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve.¹⁹ (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,390)

Coleridge too emerges in many contemporary accounts as a man living in meditation, one who can (for example) write a prospectus for a series of lectures far more effectively than he can deliver them or even refrain from digressing as he proceeds through the course. The potential likeness between Hamlet and Coleridge comes even more to the fore in Coleridge's 1813 lectures, where he emphasizes Hamlet's 'enormous intellectual activity, and a consequent proportionate aversion to real action' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 539), as well as his penchant for 'running into long reasonings—carrying off the impatience and uneasy feeling of expectation by running away from the *particular* in the *general*[:] this aversion to personal, individual, concerns and escape to Generalization and general reasonings a most important characteristic' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) 1,541).

Another similarity that becomes legible at this period is that between some of Coleridge's arguments regarding Shakespeare (including those pertaining to the relation between his genius and his judgement) and those made by the German critic August Wilhelm Schlegel in his *Über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (*On Dramatic Art and Literature*, 3 vols, 1809-11; translated into English in 1815 as *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*).²⁰ Sometime between the eighth and ninth lectures of the 1811-12 series, Coleridge appears to have received a copy of at least one of Schlegel's volumes, and Schlegel's influence is immediately discernible in the remaining lectures in this series,²¹ as well as in those he gave at the Surrey Institution in 1812 and in Bristol in 1813 (at which point he was reportedly bringing his copy of Schlegel into the lecture room with him). While much has been made of Coleridge's alleged 'plagiarism' from Schlegel,²² what is finally at stake here is (p. 510) something else entirely: the critical value of the language of 'organic form' for our understanding of both Shakespeare and romantic criticism. Coleridge in no way sought to suppress his indebtedness to a certain 'Work by a German writer', as he termed Schlegel's lectures just before citing his crucial distinction between 'mechanic and organic regularity' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 353, 358), and he subsequently drew on him almost verbatim in an important lecture given at the Surrey Institution in December, 1812. Arguing again that 'the Judgement of the great Poet [is] not less deserving of our wonder than his Genius' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) I, 494), Coleridge explains that he is not about to suggest that genius is immune to rules or regulation, but wants to suggest instead that genius (here, poetic spirit) is better understood as being governed by its own internal rules— 'the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination' (*Lectures* 1808-19 (CC) I, 494-5)—rather than by such externally imposed criteria as, for example, the three unities or any other arbitrary critical dicta.²³

Imagine not I am to oppose Genius to Rules—No!—the Comparative value of these Rules is the very cause to be tried.—The Spirit of Poetry like all other living Powers, must of necessity circumscribe itself by Rules, were it only to unite Power with Beauty. It must embody in order to reveal itself; but a living Body is of neces-

sity an organized one—& what is organization, but the connection of Parts to a whole, so that each Part is at once End & Means! (*Lects* 1808–19 I, (CC) 494; compare Schlegel II, 94)

Allowing that poetic genius must be circumscribed by rules, Coleridge argues (following Schlegel) that it is to abide by those rules which arise internally, rather than those rules or criteria which have been externally imposed. No work of art is formless; what is at stake is the agency of shaping and forming the material. Alluding once more to Schlegel, here ‘a Continental Critic’, Coleridge sets forth the difference between mechanical and organic regulation in decidedly Schlegelian terms:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened[.]—The organic form on the other hand is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one & the same with the perfection of its outward Form. (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 495; compare Schlegel II, 94–5)

Thus it is that Coleridge repeatedly observes of Shakespeare that the logic of his plays arises from within their own structure, their own ‘nature’.

(p. 511) Integral to this inflection of the organic is that the form is innate and indwelling. As he remarks elsewhere, in a lengthy metaphor of the poetic process as a living plant, ‘the vital principle of the Plant can make itself manifest only by embodying itself in the materials that immediately surround it’; then, once it has done so, ‘it takes them up into itself, forces them into parts of its own Life, modifies & transmutes every power by which it is itself modified: & the result is, a living whole’ (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) 1,447). In Coleridge’s reading of Shakespeare, the surrounding materials are often construed as the politics, literature, and intellectual ‘genius’ of the age in which he lived, while the modification of these materials may be read in Shakespeare’s depiction not of ‘individual’ characters but of ‘classes’ of characters, finally the process less of observation than of meditation. Incorporating character, story, and invention into his own work, then, the poet endows them with an agency of their own, such that they—in the end, the words of the plays—generate and modify the play in which they appear. Accordingly, it is because Shakespeare puts on display ‘the life and principle of the being, with organic regularity’ that ‘the separate speeches do not appear to be produced the one by the former but to arise out of the peculiar character of the speaker’—as, for example, the Boatswain in the opening scene of *The Tempest*, when ‘a sense of danger impresses all and the bonds of reverence are thrown off and he gives a loose to his feelings and thus to the old Counsellor pours forth his vulgar mind’ (*Lects* 1808–19 (CC) I, 358). Similarly (and, not coincidentally, once again in relation to the opening scene of a play), Coleridge observes of the ‘Weird Sisters’ that they establish the ‘Key-note of the character of the whole play’ (‘the invocation is made at once to the Imagination, and the emotions connected therewith’; *M* (CC) IV, 786)—their importance confirmed (*I*.iii) ‘after such an order of the King’s as establishes their supernatural powers of information’ (*M* (CC) IV, 787). What Coleridge here terms ‘Key-note’ he elsewhere denominates ‘germ’, a formulation which more aptly captures the

'vital principle' which Coleridge habitually views as representative of Shakespeare's judgement.

In the first of his 1818-19 lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge quickly distanced himself from Schlegel with the announcement that 'I am proud that I was the first in time who publicly demonstrated to the full extent of the position, that the supposed Irregularity and Extravagances of Shakespear were the mere dreams of... Pedan-try',²⁴ clarifying that his principal object in these lectures would be 'to prove that in all points from the most important to the most minute, the Judgement of Shakespear is commensurate with his Genius' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 263). While such broad claims are familiar, Coleridge's procedure here differs from that of earlier lectures in an important way. Rather than beginning with a discourse on general principles or on the history of the drama, Coleridge adopts what he hopes will be 'a more instructive form' (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 263) of criticizing Shakespeare's plays (p. 512) in a more 'minute' or 'practical' fashion, proceeding scene by scene through the plays under consideration.²⁵ In support of this critical method, Coleridge did not rely on notes from earlier courses of lectures but instead brought into the lecture hall with him his copy of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (ed. Samuel Ayscough, 2 vols, 1807), which he had had rebound with interleaved blank sheets on which he had written prefatory essays and detailed commentary on the texts (*Lects* 1808-19 (CC) II, 257; *M* (CC) IV, 778-9). Reflecting Coleridge's annotations and local concerns, these lectures concentrate throughout on what he elsewhere termed 'hypercriticism' (*CN* III, 3970)—in this case close critical attention to such seeming 'minutiae' as meter, rhyme, personae, diction, 'quibbles', and imagery in support of the organic development and unity of the play under scrutiny. Take, for example, Coleridge's reflections on Mowbray's challenge to Bolingbroke in the first scene of *Richard II* ('To prove myself a loyal gentleman / Even in the best blood chamber'd in his bosom; / In haste whereof, most heartily I pray / Your highness to assign our trial-day' (I.i.148-51):

Q[uer]y. The occasional interspersion of rhymes and the more frequent winding up of a Speech therewith—what purpose was this to answer? In the earnest Drama, I mean.—Deliberateness? An attempt as in Mowbray to collect himself and *be cool* at the close? I can see that in the following Speeches the rhyme answers the purposes of the Greek Chorus, and distinguishes] the *general* truths from the passions of the Dialogue—but this is not exactly to *justify* the practice which is unfrequent in proportion to the excellence of Sh[akespeare]'s Plays.—One thing, however, is to be observed—they are *historical, known, & so far formal* Characters, the reality of which is already a *fact*. (*MIV*, 797)

Attending to something as seemingly innocuous as the transition from blank verse to a closed couplet, Coleridge reads there not only a formal pattern (its repetition in numerous speeches early on in the play) but also an insight into the formality of the characters themselves (for whom unrhymed verse maybe too colloquial), the tension between the 'deliberateness' of the versification and the passions of the characters themselves, and, as a cumulative result, the mood created by what he elsewhere terms 'intercurrent verse' (*M* (CC) IV, 795). In this way, a minute observation prompts more comprehensive speculations regarding versification, character, and tone, all potentially to be assembled in support of the play's organic unity.

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Similar observations abound throughout Coleridge's marginalia, such as in his commentary on Horatio's remarks, 'Let us impart what we have seen to-night / Unto young Hamlet' (*I.i.169-70*)— 'the unobtrusive and yet fully adequate mode of introducing the main Character, *Young Hamlet*, upon whom transfers itself all the interest excited for the acts & concerns of the King, his Father' (*M (CC)* (p. 513) IV, 841)—or his commentary shortly thereafter when the King addresses Laertes, 'And now, Laertes, what's the news with you? / You told us of some suit; what is't, Laertes?' (*I.ii.42-3*)— 'Shakespear's art in introducing] a most important but still subordinate character first... So Laertes—who is yet thus graciously treated from the assistance given to the election of the King's Brother instead of Son by Polonius' (*M (CC)* IV, 841). As slight as these observations may appear, they nonetheless may be seen to remind us simultaneously of the priorities of Coleridge's critical method at this period and of many of the headings of his evaluation of Shakespeare. '*Young Hamlet*', for example, underscores both what Coleridge elsewhere celebrates as 'Shakespear's *instinctive* propriety in the choice of Words' (*M (CC)* IV, 799) and his judgement in introducing the main character in such an unobtrusive yet 'fully adequate' manner. And Shakespeare's judgement is similarly on display in representing the King's interest in Laertes (that is to say, Hamlet's rival) before there is any indication of his disposition toward his stepson Hamlet. In Coleridge's hands, all such details contribute to the 'living whole' that is the play, 'in which we may in thought & by artificial Abstraction distinguish the material <Body> from the indwelling Spirit, the contingent or accidental from the universal & essential, but in reality, in the thing itself, we cannot separate them' (*Lects 1808-19 (CC)* I, 447).

However arbitrary and accidental Coleridge's marginalia and incomplete notes may sometimes sound, more often than not they will be found to participate in the 'living whole' that is Coleridge's unique style of Shakespeare criticism, at once abstract and particular, equal parts practical and speculative intervention. Due in part to his insistence on Shakespeare as a poet, Coleridge's criticism of Shakespeare repeatedly reveals many of his steadfast beliefs about the necessary 'powers' of great poetry: the power of making everything present by a series of images; the power of fancy in bringing together dissimilar images; the power of imagination in modifying these images and forcing the many into one; the Protean power of the poet in sending himself out of himself; the power of the poet to imitate (rather than copy) nature; and the power of the poem, understood as an organic form, in relating all of the parts to the whole. Coleridge's critical dicta also often underscore what he himself aspires to achieve in his lectures on Shakespeare: to bring into the fullest play the imagination and reason of his auditors, and to make his auditors better as well as wiser (*Lects 1808-19 (CC)* I, 515, 522). Although Coleridge did not lecture or publish on Shakespeare after 1819, his continued preoccupation with him is evident most memorably in his conversation, as recorded in the *Table Talk*. It is here that Coleridge designates Shakespeare 'the Spinozistic deity, an omnipresent creativeness', further remarking that 'Shakespeare's rhymed verses are excessively condensed; epigrams with the point every where; but in his blank verse, he is diffused with a linked sweetness long drawn out' (*TT (CC)* 1,125), and it is here as well that he observes of Shakespeare that 'one sentence begets the next naturally; the meaning is all inwoven. (p. 514) He goes

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on kindling like a meteor through the dark atmosphere' (*TT (CC) I*, 356). Finally, in one of the final conversations recorded in *Table Talk*, Coleridge describes Shakespeare thus:

Shakespeare is of no age The construction of Shakespeare's sentences, whether in verse or prose, is the necessary and homogenous vehicle of his peculiar manner of thinking. His style is not the style of the age...

I believe Shakespeare was not a whit more intelligible in his own day than he is now to an educated man, except for a few local allusions of no consequence. As I said, he is of no age— nor of any religion, or party, or profession. The body and substance of his own works came out of the unfathomable depths of his own oceanic mind—his observation and reading supplied him with the drapery of his figures. (*TT (CC) I*, 467–8)

Perhaps something similar might be said of Coleridge:²⁶ the innovations of his criticism came out of the depths of his own mind and years of thinking on the principles of poetry, while his close reading in Shakespeare provided him with the necessary figures, accidents, and minutiae to substantiate his claims. 'Shakespeare' names not merely the poet who exceeded his own age and genius, but also the occasion of Coleridge's most important literary criticisms.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Writing to his sister later in the spring, De Quincey noted that Coleridge 'had his pocket picked of the main part of his lecture as he walked from the Strand; but, having notes,

he managed to get through very well' (cited in *Lects 1808-19* (CC) 1, 15; see also the account of Edward Jerningham, cited in *Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 145).

(²) The definitive texts of the lectures are to be found in *Lects 1808-19* (CC), painstakingly established by R. A. Foakes. But given the fragmentary and sometimes contradictory nature of these notes and records, it is not possible to establish a canonical text for any of the lectures.

(³) *Lectures on the Principles of Poetry* (1808, Royal Institution); *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry* (1811-12, London Philosophical Society); *Lectures on European Drama* (1812, Willis's Rooms, London); *Lectures on Belles Lettres* (1812, Surrey Institution); *Lectures on Shakespeare and Education* (1813, White Lion, Bristol); *Lectures on the Principles of Judgement, Culture, and European Literature* (1818, London Philosophical Society); *Lectures on Shakespeare* (1818-19, Crown and Anchor, Strand); *Lectures on Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Spenser, Ariosto, and Cervantes* (1819, Crown and Anchor, Strand). For a more detailed account of this trajectory, see *Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, xxxix-xliv.

(⁴) See Coleridge's 1818 prospectus for a course of lectures on Shakespeare, where he proposes not a reflection on general principles but a scene-by-scene analysis (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) II, 34). See also chapter 15 of the *Biographia*, with its initial attention to the 'purposes of practical criticism' (*BL* (CC) II, 19). The phrase was later adopted and given greater currency by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* (1929).

(⁵) See, for example, Harbage's praise for Coleridge as 'the greatest of Shakespearean critics' (*Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare* 25, 22).

(⁶) Here and throughout, cancellations in Coleridge's notes have been silently elided.

(⁷) See also Coleridge's letter to Daniel Stuart of 13 May 1816 (*CL* IV 642), and his notes on stage 'delusion' apropos *The Tempest* (*M* (CC) IV, 781).

(⁸) See also Coleridge's definition of the imagination in lecture 4 of the 1811-12 series (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 249) and his definition of beauty in 'Principles of Genial Criticism' (*SW&F* (CC) I, 369, 372).

(⁹) See Coleridge's 1807 letter to Davy before undertaking to lecture at the Royal Institution (*CL* III, 29-30), and his 1818 letter to William Mudford, recollecting the same series of lectures (*CL* IV, 839).

(¹⁰) Compare the prospectus to the 1811-12 lecture series, *Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 179.

(¹¹) See Coleridge's apology for using the term 'psychology' in the 'Treatise on Method' (*SW&F* (CC) I, 655).

(¹²) Compare Coleridge's formulation in chapter 15 of the *Biographia*: 'No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher' (*BL* (CC) II, 25-6). See also the 1802 letter to Sotheby (*CL* II, 810).

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(¹³) For a representative account of the difficulty of assembling these materials, see Foakes's notes on the texts for the third lecture of the 1808 series (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 60-1).

(¹⁴) Schlegel, for example, entirely neglects Shakespeare's poetry, while Hazlitt relegates it to a brief, concluding chapter of *The Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, which he begins by observing that 'Our idolatry of Shakespear... ceases with his plays. In his other productions, he was a mere author, though not a common author' (*Works* IV, 357). Remarking that recent claims for the equality of the poems to the plays are but the fashionable and 'desperate cant of modern criticism' (a jab at Coleridge?), he then blithely characterizes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* as 'a couple of ice-houses. They are about as hard, as glittering, and as cold' (*Works* IV, 358).

(¹⁵) Compare Coleridge's definitions in chapter 12 of the *Biographia* (*BL* (CC) I, 293).

(¹⁶) Wordsworth was in fact in attendance at the third and fourth lectures of this series, spent the night with Coleridge, and (according to Richard Holmes) reaped the benefits of these lectures and Coleridge's conversation apropos the 'habits of exalted Imagination' in his lines on St Paul's; see Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, 126-7.

(¹⁷) As Coleridge remarks in a subsequent lecture, 'Shakespeare's characters from Othello or Macbeth down to Dogberry are ideal: the are not <the> things but the abstracts of the things which a great mind may take into itself and naturalize to its own heaven' (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 351).

(¹⁸) Much as Coleridge will later remark that Prospero is 'the very Shakespeare himself, as it were, of the tempest' (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) II, 269).

(¹⁹) See Crabb Robinson's letter of 3 January 1812, where he observes apropos these concluding remarks, 'Somebody said to me, this is a Satire on himself; No, said I, it is an Elegy. A great many of his remarks on Hamlet were capable of a like application' (cited in *Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 391)

(²⁰) See Hazlitt's review (*Works* XVI, 57-99), where he notes that 'It is indeed by far the best account which has been given of the plays of that great genius by any writer, either among ourselves, or abroad' (*Works* XVI, 59).

(²¹) See, for example, Lecture 9, where Coleridge refers to 'a Work by a German writer' and goes on to make a decidedly Schlegelian distinction between 'mechanic and organic regularity' (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, 353, 358). For further details pertaining to Coleridge's first acquaintance with Schlegel, see *Lects 1808-19* (CC) 1,172-5, as well as an important letter from December 1811 in which, ironically, Coleridge defends Walter Scott against charges of having plagiarized from *Christabel* (*CL* III, 354-61).

(²²) As Foakes notes, what is at stake in aligning Coleridge and Schlegel is not *whether* Coleridge borrowed from Schlegel, but *when*: beginning in December, 1811, the impact of Schlegel 'was so strong in the next few years that all Coleridge's general comments in his

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lectures, as distinct from his practical criticism, tend to bear the marks of his close reading in Schlegel's lectures. Conversely, then, the lack of any such influence in lecture-notes that on other grounds appear to be early tends to confirm that they belong to the period before he read Schlegel' (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, lxii). Part of the appeal for Coleridge of Schlegel's lectures, according to Foakes, was that he found there 'echoes of his own thought, but well articulated and more coherently set forth' (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) I, lxiii). See also Raysor, I, xxvi-xxviii. For a less accommodating account of Coleridge's use of Schlegel, see Fruman, 141-64.

(²³) See Coleridge's disagreement with Johnson's observations on what it would take to make *Othello* into a 'regular' tragedy, *CM* (CC) IV, 863.

(²⁴) See also Coleridge's 1818 letters to James Perry (*CL* IV, 831) and William Mudford (*CL* IV, 839).

(²⁵) See Coleridge's 1818 prospectus for a series of lectures on Shakespeare, in which he designates his method 'particular and practical criticism' with a scene-by-scene analysis of the plays under consideration (*Lects 1808-19* (CC) II, 35).

(²⁶) Henry Nelson Coleridge makes a similar observation in the first (1835) collection of Coleridge's Table Talk; see *TT* (CC) I, 468 n. 9.

Charles Mahoney

Charles Mahoney is Associate Professor of English and Interim Associate Director of the Humanities Institute at the University of Connecticut. He is the author of *Romantics and Renegades: The Poetics of Political Reaction* (2003), editor of Leigh Hunt, *Later Literary Writings* (2003), co-editor (with Michael O'Neill) of *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (2008), and editor of *The Blackwell Companion to Romantic Poetry* (forthcoming, 2009). He is currently at work on a study of Romantic lyric poetry and lyric theory entitled *Revolutionary Measures: Romanticism, Formalism, Criticism*.