

## Coleridge's Humour in *The Watchman*

### Abstract:

This essay seeks to challenge Coleridge's (and some subsequent critics') retrospective accounts of the glib naivety of *The Watchman's* humour, by arguing that his jokes reveal a careful and considered approach to the dissemination of his ideas. It identifies several types of humour employed within the work, examining both the articles Coleridge himself contributed, and the manner in which he arranged the contributions of others. Such an examination is only possible in full view of the contemporary periodical context, to which Coleridge is quite clearly responding. By adapting, and at times undermining, the forms of humour popular amongst the readerships of other periodicals, Coleridge's own jokes reveal his pervasive attention to his relationship with his audience. *The Watchman* consistently wrong-foots its reader with its subtle and provocative wit, and in so doing it displays a conception of the function and purpose of humour that Coleridge would gradually refine in the years to come.

**Keywords:** Coleridge, *Watchman*, humour, editing, news, wit

In a particularly bitter letter to Southey of late 1795, writing of the circumstances of their growing estrangement from one another, Coleridge describes his internal response to his friend's apparent rejection of Pantisocracy:

Such opinions were indeed unassailable—the Javelin of Argument and the arrows of

Ridicule would have been equally misapplied—a Straw would have wounded them mortally. I did not condescend to waste my Intellect upon them.<sup>1</sup>

Coleridge's language here reveals a useful detail about his attitude to persuasion and discussion. In considering the figurative battle of intellectual debate, two primary weapons come immediately to his mind: 'argument' and 'ridicule'. The latter is afforded the same validity as a tool of combat as the former, and is presented as a comparably efficient instrument in the siege of an opponent's reasoning. This essay focuses on Coleridge's propensity to use ridicule, and humour more generally, as a means of persuasion, focusing particularly upon *The Watchman* (which he had begun to plan a month before writing this letter).<sup>2</sup> The ten issues of this periodical, produced in the early months of 1796, are full of jokes and satirical barbs, many of them ridiculing individuals and attitudes elsewhere lauded within the work. As a tool of persuasion this strategy, if it can be called that, does not at first seem to possess the cohesion necessary convincingly to argue a case. Often subtle and deliberately ambiguous, Coleridge's humour demands closer attention if its aim is to be discerned. His jokes, whether successful, unsuccessful, or deliberately miscalculated, reveal much about his character as an editor, and his wider ambitions for *The Watchman*.

*Romanticism* 25.2 (2019): 117–128

DOI: 10.3366/rom.2019.0413

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The subtle and often provocative calibration of Coleridge's humour is rooted in an innate preoccupation with linguistic ambivalence. For Seamus Perry and Tim Fulford this manifests itself particularly in Coleridge's puns, which 'discover a division' within names (and consequently within that which they denote), and which 'challenge established ideologies' by 'reflexively bringing the origin of meaning into question'.<sup>3</sup> Coleridge is very rarely, however, given credit for applying this subtlety to *The Watchman*. More than one reader and critic has described its humorous impulses as 'glib' and inappropriately 'light' in tone, or even 'immature', expressing a perception perhaps influenced by Coleridge's own retrospective self-assessment.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Sir George and Lady Beaumont of 1801, for instance, Coleridge describes his earlier tendency to 'speak vehemently from mere verbal association', and recounts how he 'aided the Jacobins by witty sarcasms' (CL, ii. 1001). Rather than attributing this behaviour to any strong political conviction, Coleridge justifies his words as the product of a 'light and dancing heart', as mere performances to please others (CL, ii. 1001). Yet where *The Watchman* is concerned this diagnosis is not wholly convincing: his humour, as Perry and Fulford imply, is much more carefully applied, seeking to provoke a more calculated response from its audience.

From the first issue of *The Watchman*, published on 1 March 1796, Coleridge indicates a perception of his relationship to his audience fundamentally at odds with that of his later descriptions. Rather than imagining them as a crowd, to be entertained by the 'dancing' performance of his wit, he consciously envisions a different sort of reader, engaged in a different sort of reading. Like many periodicals of the eighteenth century, from the *Spectator* onwards, *The Watchman* establishes itself in the context of the physical spaces where political information was traditionally disseminated and discussed, namely coffeehouses and (mirroring more

contemporary radical periodicals) taverns.<sup>5</sup> In *The Watchman*, however, the relationship is an oppositional one. 'At the alehouse', Coleridge writes in his 'Introductory Essay', the poor man

meets the Exciseman: and hears his *impartial* invectives against reformers, with scarcely less deference, than when he listens to the equally *impartial* Orator of the Pulpit, who teaches him hatred in the name of the God of Love.<sup>6</sup>

Suspicious of the 'deference' and gullibility of listeners who witness such performances in such settings, Coleridge signals his movement away from them, implicitly criticising orators like John Thelwall (who was well-known for addressing crowds at the Globe Tavern on the Strand) for '[loving] a Tavern better than your own fire-side'.<sup>7</sup> *The Watchman* imagines its own reader sitting alone by the fire-side that had been spurned by such firebrands, as may be seen in an introductory paragraph to an account of a military campaign printed in the seventh issue: 'Let those who sit by the fire-side', Coleridge writes, 'and hear of [war] at a safe distance attentively peruse the following' (TW, 238). The shift from hearing of war, to perusing details of it, mimics the change in attitude and behaviour that Coleridge seeks to engender. He pictures his reader beside a domestic hearth, not swept up by eloquence and rhetoric, but engaged in the solitary activity of textual scrutiny.

*The Watchman's* humour makes a great deal of sense in this context. More often than not, it appears carefully designed to appeal specifically to a reader, rather than a listener. In a paragraph printed without a title at the close of the final issue, Coleridge appears to retract one of his criticisms of Thomas Beddoes' 'Essay on Pitt', reviewed in the previous issue. 'In our last Number', Coleridge writes,

we noticed a degree of apparent illiberality in the introduction of [Beddoes'] eighth Chapter, in which the Archdeacon is

represented as an accomplice in his Son's scheme of tying a cannister to the tail of a Dog. On a re-perusal of the passage we perceive that this scheme was conveyed by the Boy in a *whisper* to his brother, and is not supposed to have been heard by the Father: and such, we are assured, was the Author's intention. Our Readers therefore will consider the reprehension as unfounded. (TW, 373-4)

Given the tone of his argument in the original review (which unconvincingly censures Beddoes' representation of 'our dignified clergy'), it is difficult not to feel that Coleridge's statement is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. As a listener, this inference is as far as the joke could go. For a reader however, able to look back over the passage at leisure (and perhaps even to re-peruse, like Coleridge, the 'Essay on Pitt' itself), the true import of the humour may be apprehended. Beddoes' essay, when consulted, confirms the suspicion of Coleridge's sarcasm: it directly juxtaposes the boy's mistreatment of the animal with the Archdeacon's intolerance of French 'dogs', whose recent defeat in battle (against the Austrian General Clairsait) he celebrates in the opening lines.<sup>8</sup> The Archdeacon is thus implicated in the piece's wider critique of military aggression towards the French (which, Beddoes implies, is as cruel and unjust as the boy's 'scheme'), though he is excused immediate complicity in the boy's allegorical prank (Beddoes, 139). By forgiving the Archdeacon this small part Coleridge supports Beddoes' underlying criticism, wryly drawing attention to the character's other faults, namely his support for aggressive foreign policy and the war with France. Only by reading and contemplating the passage in the wider literary context of Beddoes' original essay, however, can the humour of the gesture be fully appreciated.

The formulation of such jokes has much in common with what Michael Scrivener terms

'seditious allegory'.<sup>9</sup> The government's increased legislative action against material suspected of treasonous or seditious intent, which culminated in the passing of the Two Acts in December 1795 (and particularly the Treasonable Practices Act, which facilitated the application of extant treason statutes to reported speech and printed texts), necessitated the concealment of politically radical material.<sup>10</sup> 'Repression', Scrivener asserts, 'made allegory a useful literary form, the ambiguity of which was convenient at trials', in theory allowing for reasonable denial of seditious intent (Scrivener, 12). The most infamous example of such writing was Thelwall's satirical allegory 'King Chaunticlere; or, The Fate of Tyranny', first printed in Daniel Isaac Eaton's periodical *Politics for the People*. Thelwall's prose narrative relates an overtly political anecdote about a 'haughty, sanguinary' 'game cock' that is decapitated, much to the relief of the 'more industrious birds' he had tyrannised.<sup>11</sup> Thelwall's allegory conceals, or at least gestures towards concealing, what might be interpreted if not as an actionable threat against the monarch, at least as politically incendiary satire (and indeed Eaton was ultimately prosecuted for publishing it).<sup>12</sup> Coleridge's deliberately oblique endorsement of Beddoes' metaphorical critique of the clergy at first appears to act in a similar way, superficially denying the significance of the metaphor whilst in reality confirming the underlying point. Sensitive to the allegory, Coleridge similarly seems to disguise his true meaning behind a protective, but nevertheless decipherable, mask.

Yet criticising a fictional clergyman for celebrating an Austrian victory is not treason or sedition, and Coleridge's reason for employing this humorous mask cannot be attributed simply to a desire to avoid prosecution under those charges. Where Thelwall's 'King Chaunticlere' uses metaphor satirically to disguise a political attack, the humour of *The Watchman* acts differently. It is a difference

most perceptible in jokes conspicuously framed in a Thelwallian radical context, notably the eighth issue's 'War: A New Mode Recommended'. This section half-jokingly proposes a less harmful manner of conducting battles:

Would it not be a better way of settling national disputes, if, instead of employing men and blood-hounds in our armies, we were to employ either game-cocks, or such other animals as are known to possess courage and ferocity. (TW, 275-6).

The term 'game-cocks', and later in the passage 'chanticleers', immediately intimates a radical allegorical significance to the piece. It is a significance that would have been at the forefront of readers' minds after Thelwall reintroduced 'King Chaunticlere' late the previous year, in *John Gilpin's Ghost: or the Warning Voice of King Chanticleer* (a satirical ballad that explicitly confirmed the seditious association between the beheaded gamecock and the monarchy).<sup>13</sup> 'War: a New Mode Recommended', from the outset, conspicuously places itself within this context.

Yet it is not, as one might initially suspect, lifted from one of Eaton's radical publications. It is instead an anonymous contribution taken from an April issue of Benjamin Flower's *Cambridge Intelligencer*: a periodical that by 1796 had a diverse national readership, and a more measured approach to criticism of the government than the coarsely satirical *Politics for the People*.<sup>14</sup> The passage's political implications are, as such, not what they first seem. Aside from the plurality of the chanticleers, and thus the grammatical difficulty of an association with George III himself, their role makes sense only if they specifically do not refer to monarchs: their deaths are directly opposed to human deaths, intended to prevent, not allegorise, the 'cutting [of] the throats of men' (TW, 276). The piece

thus intimates and then neutralises a political metaphor, deflating expectations of overt republicanism and abruptly undercutting the initially suggested allegory.

Coleridge's inclusion of this misleading article, with its unmistakeable topical relevance, may be interpreted in the context of his own and Eaton's audiences. *Politics for the People*, which was sold for just two pence, primarily (though not solely) appealed to labouring class radical readers, and its overt and exuberant radicalism makes sense in that regard.<sup>15</sup> The second issue, for example, opens with an account of an 'honest cobbler' who, upon meeting a 'polite Courtier', instructs him to 'kiss my a-se', mirroring, and providing a model for, his labouring class readers' attitudes to social elites and those in power (*Politics for the People*, i. 13).<sup>16</sup> The readership Coleridge addresses, by contrast, was ideologically much broader. Contemporary letters and later anecdotes indicate that he pitched *The Watchman* (priced at four pence, double the cost of *Politics for the People*) to everyone from tallow chandlers to aristocrats, although the majority of his audience were middle-class dissenters (whose subscriptions were personally gathered during his tour of the midlands and northern England in early 1796).<sup>17</sup> The views of this large section of Coleridge's readership, especially with regard to republicanism, were more various than those of the London-based labouring class audience to which Eaton addressed *Politics for the People*.<sup>18</sup> Where many of Coleridge's dissenting readers, like the Unitarian preacher John Edwards (who went on to contribute to later issues of the periodical), had voiced outspoken support for the Revolution and called for 'the downfall of tyranny' in Britain, still others were more conservative in their outlook.<sup>19</sup> Industrialists and business owners, for instance, like the draper and Presbyterian Congregationalist Martin Barr (with whose family Coleridge spent an evening in Worcester), had a greater

attachment to, and indeed a vested interest in, the 'older establishment' (as Robin Whittaker puts it).<sup>20</sup> Many of these readers took a dimmer view of Thelwallian radical insurgency, conscious, for instance, of the effect its ideals might have on trade.<sup>21</sup> Had 'War: A New Mode Recommended' delivered on its allegorical implications, even if they had stopped short of explicit sedition, Coleridge would not have struck a chord with this significant portion of his audience.

The inclusion of this consciously provocative insinuation implicitly challenges traditional fault lines within Coleridge's readership. After neutralising an implication that threatens to divide it, the passage opens out into humour in which all sections of his readership might share, ending with a ribald joke about 'gentlemen of Lancashire and Cheshire' who, though they claim to fight battles, in fact 'fight only their cocks' (TW, 276). By poking fun at these gentlemen, who were well-known for their taste for cockfighting, it references a rivalry specific enough that it would be unlikely to cause widespread offence.<sup>22</sup> This progression, from the unfulfilled contentiousness of a satirical attack on the king, to the lighthearted lampooning of private individuals, achieves the same effect as Coleridge's Archdeacon remark but by different means. Rather than disguising the implied joke such that an appreciation of it requires careful re-perusal, 'War: A New Mode Recommended' instead starts out with a potentially offensive implication, and subsequently forces the reader to reconsider their presumption when the humour's true target (in this case the implied cowardice of these gentlemen, and by extension perhaps the aristocracy in general) is revealed. In both instances Coleridge presents a deliberately obscured position on the matter in hand, and thus fulfils a more fundamental goal: compelling his readers to shed their partiality and reconsider their initial assumptions.

This does not necessarily imply that Coleridge sought to avoid overtly controversial jokes. Where such material is present, however, the ground has always been carefully prepared to encourage reflection (as opposed to immediate agreement or disagreement). It is within the pages of *The Watchman*, for example, that Coleridge begins to formulate some of his earliest satirical attacks upon revolutionary France, although the force of these attacks is softened for the reader by careful contextualisation. On the 11th and 12th of April several of the London newspapers, including *The Times* and the *Morning Chronicle*, printed news of a series of communications that had been transmitted during the preceding month between François Barthelemy, French minister representative in Switzerland, and William Wickham, the English ambassador to Switzerland.<sup>23</sup> These displayed evidence of the English government broaching the subject of a peace treaty, and receiving a diplomatic, though unequivocal, dismissal from the Directory of the French Republic. It was not until the eighth issue of *The Watchman*, printed on 19 April 1796, that Coleridge had the opportunity publicly to reflect on this news, condemning the French decision in his 'Remonstrance: To the French Legislators'. For Björn Bosserhoff this essay in particular, along with Coleridge's subsequent criticisms of French military aggression, displays the earliest stages of his growing 'impatience with French megalomania', and certainly his criticism of the 'abject court-craft' of French politicians highlights something of an underlying shift in his perception of French politics.<sup>24</sup>

In and of itself such a critique, though potentially contentious, would not necessarily put off those amongst his readership who continued to sympathise with the actions of the French state. Rather than denouncing it, Coleridge concludes by politely 'adjur[ing] you [the French legislators] to consider, that

misused success is soon followed by adversity', consciously tempering his earlier criticisms with measured advice (*TW*, 273). His commentary, however, does not end with the close of the 'Remonstrance'. Nicholas Roe has shown how Coleridge, in putting *The Watchman* together, sought to '[draw] a narrative from seemingly miscellaneous contributions', developing themes and ideas within the structure of each issue.<sup>25</sup> In the case of his eighth issue this mode of communication is used to humorous effect, with Coleridge's subsequent arrangement of articles revealing continued reflection on the Wickham-Barthelemy correspondence, though at first the ordering seems almost arbitrary. Directly after his editorial Coleridge inserts a seemingly unrelated submission from a reader signing himself as 'Medicus' (and whom, in his annotations to a copy now held in the British Library, Coleridge identifies as Thomas Beddoes).<sup>26</sup> It is an account drawn from Samuel Bardsley's 'Miscellaneous Observations on Canine and Spontaneous Hydrophobia', detailing the story of the illness of a weaver named John Lindsay.<sup>27</sup> On the face of it this diversion into medical anecdote appears unrelated to the preceding politics, especially given the ubiquity of such dramatic shifts in subject matter and tone throughout *The Watchman*. Upon closer inspection, however, certain resemblances emerge between the account and the 'Remonstrance'.

Having worked tirelessly, in what is described as a 'paroxysm of rage and tenderness', Lindsay is said to have collapsed into a deep sleep. From this sleep he awoke complaining of 'giddiness and confusion in his head', before descending into increasingly severe 'symptoms of hydrophobia', that he attributes to his having been bitten by a 'supposed mad dog' twelve years earlier. The full spectacle of these symptoms are described by Medicus in detail:

He complained of much uneasiness at the light of a candle, that was burning in the room. On evacuating his urine, he was obliged to turn aside his head from the vessel, as he could not bear the sight of the fluid without great uneasiness. [...] He eagerly asked, if I had not heard howlings and scratchings? On being answered in the negative, he suddenly threw himself upon his knees, extending his arms in a defensive posture, and forcibly throwing back his head and body. The muscles of the face were agitated by various spasmodic contortions;—his eye balls glared, and seemed ready to start from their sockets. (*TW*, 274-5)

Coming as it does directly after Coleridge's account of the madness of French legislators, the comparison to events over the channel is unmistakable. An 'abject' man, with a desire to improve the lives of those in his care, is overcome by a violent disease and driven mad, to the point of exhibiting unwarranted aggression towards those around him. As in the case of the Archdeacon allegory, Coleridge's veiled but nevertheless damning ridicule of the French relies upon readerly attentiveness; the joke depends upon perceiving the similarity in the two 'paroxysms' (a term used in both articles), and recognising the reduction of French politics to the level of bodily dysfunction. Coleridge, in this cautious manner, voices derision of French legislators' irrationality far more forceful than any he had previously published.

In order to appreciate his intertextual ridicule, however, one must first have digested the more tentative argument that precedes it. The structure of his joke thus inherently primes the reader to consider the matter from his perspective, rather than speaking to extant prejudices on the subject. It is an example which lends weight to Tim Fulford's contention that, in producing *The Watchman*, Coleridge

'attempts to pass off with jokes serious material which he suspected might be unpopular' (Fulford, 6-7). Fulford's comment suggests that Coleridge's humour represents a defence mechanism that distances him from potentially divisive opinions. Yet as well as distancing him this very defensiveness creates the ideal conditions for the reception of those opinions. His jokes are able to pass off such views because they intrinsically facilitate deeper thought upon them. By the very nature of the joke's intertextuality (which is to say its reliance upon the preceding article), he is able to encourage his readers to work out the truth of his comparison for themselves. In later years Coleridge explicitly meditated on this process when defining 'wit', in a lecture of 1819:

Wit, generically regarded, consists in presenting thoughts or images in an unus[u]al connection with each other, for the purpose of exciting pleasure by the surprise—this connection may be real & there is in fact a scientific Wit, tho' when the conscious object is truth not amusement, we commonly give it some higher name.<sup>28</sup>

Coleridge emphasises the importance of wit not just as a means of providing pleasure, but of reflecting upon truth (though in this latter capacity it is not always known by that name). The subtle juxtaposition of incongruous ideas, hydrophobia and French military aggression for instance, not only entertains but also facilitates 'scientific' detection of deeper shared truths. Whilst in 1796 Coleridge had not expressed so concise a conception of how such jokes work, it is plain that *The Watchman's* humour, in this instance, reveals early steps towards his later definition.

That the young Coleridge may have thought of jokes in this way must in part be attributed to the influence of his reading. Discussing 'Wit and Humour' in *Observations on Man*, with which Coleridge was well-acquainted as early as

1794, David Hartley describes humour as the product of 'unnatural conjunctions of circumstances, that are really foreign to each other'.<sup>29</sup> He places great emphasis on the centrality of 'inconsistency' to the humorous, one that finds its echo in Coleridge's contemplation of wit as an 'unusual connection' of ideas (*Lects 1808-1819*, ii. 416). Though Coleridge's response to Hartley in 1796 may not be labelled one of straightforward agreement, *Observations on Man* underlined a broader paradigm shift in the eighteenth-century conception of humour. Michael Billig describes this shift as 'a reaction against Hobbes', who brands laughter, in *Leviathan*, a series of 'grimaces' brought on 'by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves'.<sup>30</sup> Eighteenth-century thinkers, as Billig puts it, began by contrast to place greater weight on incongruity, rather than superiority, as the source of humour. 'Instead of seeking the origins of laughter within the motives of the person who laughs', Billig continues, 'incongruity theories have sought to identify those incongruous features of the world that provoke laughter' (Billig, 57). For many humour theorists, among them Göran Nerhardt and John Morreall, Hartley was a key figure in this shift, and the clear debt revealed in Coleridge's 1809 lecture displays the tenacity of those ideas.<sup>31</sup> The subtlety of much of *The Watchman's* humour, and Coleridge's careful construction of unobtrusively witty metanarratives, reflect this intrinsic awareness of jokes not as blunt appeals to extant preconception, but as a means by which thought may actively be provoked.

Perhaps the most infamous instance of *The Watchman's* humour, however, seems quite starkly to contradict the view that his jokes are carefully constructed to prompt reflection. The quotation from Isaiah with which Coleridge

opens the second issue's 'Essay on Fasts': 'Wherefore my Bowels shall sound like an Harp', caused considerable offence amongst more reverent readers, losing him 'near five hundred of my subscribers at one blow', as he puts it in *Biographia Literaria*.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps influenced by the regret Coleridge voices here at this 'most censurable' joke, critical readings often treat the epigraph as a thoughtlessly brash misjudgement, with H. D. Traill, for instance, associating it with a 'delightful naïveté' on Coleridge's part (Traill, 35). It is certainly a puzzling and seemingly rash inclusion, especially given how well Coleridge knew his readership after having quite literally lived amongst them during his northern tour.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that Coleridge deliberately sought to cause at least some offence with this joke, and that its inclusion is in fact more calculated than Traill acknowledges. Aside from the fact that Coleridge would go on to condemn the irreligious tone of the *Monthly Magazine* later that year (a fact which, though it suggests *The Watchman's* puerility was intentionally included to serve an ulterior purpose, could simply be put down to Coleridgean inconsistency), the offending material itself reveals links with similar and demonstrably offensive texts (*CL*, i. 268). The 'Essay on Fasts' does not represent the first use of the quotation in a political essay: four years beforehand, in 1792, the Reverend William Woolley had published *The Benefit of Starving; or The Advantages of Hunger, Cold, and Nakedness*, which also uses Isaiah 16: 11 as an epigraph.<sup>33</sup> Woolley's essay, which similarly condemns fasting and other forms of government-induced famine (war being one of his primary targets), was not received well, with Woolley's later letters suggesting that he had been publicly prevailed upon to apologise for it.<sup>34</sup> This public distaste with Woolley's writing would have been still more apparent after his trial in 1794,

in which he was charged with libelling one Sir Richard Hill, and found his 'vulgar wit' further condemned.<sup>35</sup> Whether Coleridge, who had a keen interest in contemporary trials, was aware of Woolley or not, the episode reveals a clear precedent for the offensiveness of such jovial irreverence.<sup>36</sup>

Yet in order to understand why Coleridge might have intended to follow, knowingly or otherwise, in these footsteps, it is necessary to examine exactly how he goes about it. The epigraph does not constitute the only time Coleridge quotes from Isaiah, and in fact the essay concludes with two further passages from the book. The first of these is particularly curious:

When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: *your hands are full of blood!* (*TW*, 55)

From the text alone, removed from its original context, it is possible to deduce that the line does not refer to fasting (a time when animals specifically do not need to be slaughtered). Instead, the passage refers to sacrifices and feast days, which are explicitly condemned in the prophet's divine proclamation that 'Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth'.<sup>37</sup> When the original context is traced, it becomes apparent that the quotation in fact contradicts one of the essay's core arguments, that 'an annual *Feast* in the nature of things would have stimulated the gratitude of posterity much more effectually', proposing that it would be better to feed than starve the poor (*TW*, 52). Coleridge could have expected his largely religious dissenting readership to pick up on this inconsistency, suggesting that his intention is more complicated than the similarities with Woolley might initially indicate.<sup>38</sup>

Coleridge appears to be making himself, or his authorial persona, the butt of the joke. His



concluding misapplication of Isaiah, seen in this light, mirrors his opening epigraph's implied misinterpretation of the term 'bowels' (which in Isaiah refers simply to the bowels as the source of compassion and mercy).<sup>39</sup> This impression of authorial imprecision is compounded by the misleading reference given for the closing quotation, which solely directs the reader to 'Isaiah ch. lviii' despite the fact that the misapplied initial passage is in fact from Isaiah 1: 15. To do so in a passage which elsewhere draws attention to linguistic inaccuracy, namely in the common pronunciation of 'the new Form of Prayer' ('or, as the women bawl it about the streets, the *new former* prayer—bye the bye, no *unmeaning* blunder'), is particularly revealing (TW, 53). Coleridge, who of course knew his bible, is enticing his reader to think otherwise, performing an ignorance and impudence in his approach to it, and encouraging his reader to notice his blunders.

Felicity James' observations about *The Watchman* are useful in decoding this pretence. Writing about his approach to editing the periodical, James contends that Coleridge is negotiating an 'individual role within the larger context of the periodical, [...] struggling to articulate his own social stance, to work out a way between retreat and engagement' (James, 2). This concept of negotiation may similarly be applied to the authorial performance of the 'Essay on Fasts', which begins to appear more layered than a first glance might display. In making his authorial persona seem unreliable with his inappropriate and ill-advisedly humorous biblical quotations, Coleridge steps back slightly from his own convictions, giving up room into which the reader may advance with critical engagement. He negotiates, to use James' term, between arguing his case, and allowing the reader space for independent critical response, prompting reflection on the strengths and the blunders in his argument. He may even have hoped that readers might send

in their responses, providing entertaining material for future issues, and replicating the audience engagement evident in the *Monthly Magazine* (which often featured readers' corrections and retorts, and which Coleridge explicitly sought to rival).<sup>40</sup> Though such a conjecture is purely speculative, it gestures towards the nature of his underlying intentions for the 'Essay on Fasts' and *The Watchman* as a whole. By offending some with his jokes, and in the process revealing uncharacteristically glaring weaknesses in his argument, Coleridge calls the reader to attention, demanding textual scrutiny.

This is not to say that Coleridge intended to risk losing subscribers: if he is guilty of anything it must be of misjudging the degree, not the nature, of his readers' sensitivity. Nor is it to say that he is in fact critical of fast days, an institution against which he also rails in *Conciones ad Populum*.<sup>41</sup> Instead, by mockingly undermining his own position, Coleridge fundamentally spotlights the inherent prejudice of the essayist, placing an emphasis on the inescapability of authorial bias that serves his wider ambitions for *The Watchman*. From the outset, in the first issue's 'Introductory Essay', Coleridge draws attention to this bias, asserting that '[i]t would be absurd to promise [...] neutrality in the political Essays', and encouraging his reader to recognise (and critically engage with) this inherent lack of neutrality. The 'very act of dissenting from established opinions', he states, 'must generate habits precursive to the love of freedom. Man begins to be free when he begins to examine' (TW, 13). Coleridge's subversion of himself, as a communicator and disseminator of formulated opinions, eliminates the final barrier to that aim: one cannot ask for critical engagement and then impel a reader blindly to accept one's views. Coleridge did object to fast days (as his earlier writings make plain), but by deliberately, though apparently unintentionally, undermining his argument,

he calls upon the reader to make a personal judgement of their own.

Humour, Coleridge instinctively recognised, is the perfect tool for this purpose. It allows for a lighthearted remove from contentious issues, whilst simultaneously encouraging (through the studied ambiguities Coleridge creates) critical engagement. In the 'Essay on Fasts' Coleridge plays the fool, whose argument, because spoken half in jest and apparently full of self-contradiction, demands all the more scrutiny to discern exactly how 'unmeaning' his blunders are (TW, 53). In so doing, he fulfils the implied self-criticism intimated in the periodical's title, one which links his own role as a 'faithful watchman' with a running eighteenth-century joke about the ineffectiveness of watchmen. In previous decades newspapers had frequently carried accounts of idle and ineffective watchmen, falling asleep at their posts or failing to apprehend criminals, to the extent that they became something of a byword for ineptitude in popular culture (with one frequently reprinted 1790s handbill, for instance, detailing the story of a theft, in response to which the summoned watchman merely returns to his box and 'fall[s] fast asleep').<sup>42</sup> For Coleridge too, in another of his few references to watchmen, these qualities are insinuated: in 'To the Nightingale' he describes

the drowsy cry of Watchmen,  
(Those hoarse unfeather'd Nightingales of  
TIME!)<sup>43</sup>

By intimating these connotations of 'unfeather'd' drowsiness (which recall Peter Pindar's description of the 'drowsy watchman' in the satirical 'Tears of St. Margaret') in the title of *The Watchman*, Coleridge encourages the reader to see a somewhat risible character lurking beneath his initial suggestion of an 'implacable guardian of true values', as Seamus Perry puts it (Perry, 43).<sup>44</sup> He prompts his

readers, before a word of the periodical itself is read, to be on their guard, for (like the watchman he impersonates) he will not necessarily protect them from harm. As he does in the 'Essay on Fasts', Coleridge deliberately suggests that his is a persona not to be taken entirely at his word: he encourages the reader, in a manner that coheres with *The Watchman's* stated objectives, to question and examine his unavoidable 'bias' in order to achieve true intellectual security (TW, 14).

This, then, is the humour at the heart of *The Watchman*. It is a work which everywhere reveals Coleridge's essential awareness of his own prejudice, employing a jocular impulse towards self-mockery in order to highlight that *The Watchman*, like any piece of writing, cannot promise absolute 'neutrality' (TW, 14). Though he expresses and makes a case for certain views, he also draws attention, in this way, to the inescapable bias within them, inducing his reader not to accept his arguments blindly (as the 'herd[s]' in taverns do).<sup>45</sup> This strategy reveals the governing principle behind Coleridge's manipulation of jokes and witticisms in *The Watchman*, namely a fundamental desire to encourage more attentive and analytical reading practices. Whether by forcing re-perusal of cited texts with ambiguously humorous references, by intimating jokes only to negate their significance, or, ultimately, by lightheartedly undermining his own authorial voice, Coleridge urges his reader to scrutinise and reassess his work. Whilst he affirms that *The Watchman*, like its namesake, may proclaim the time (or the 'State of the Political Atmosphere'), he simultaneously suggests that it should not be relied upon wholly to replace the vigilance of the reader (TW, 6). 'Men always serve the cause of freedom by *thinking*', Coleridge asserts in the 'Introductory Essay', and *The Watchman's* multifaceted and often misleading humour consistently necessitates that act (TW, 13).

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## NOTES

1. *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (6 vols, Oxford, 1956–71), i. 165; hereafter CL.
2. See his correspondence with Poole: CL, i. 161.
3. Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge's Names', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 11 (Spring 1998), 37–47, 47; Tim Fulford, *Coleridge's Figurative Language* (New York, 1991), xvii.
4. Michael John Kooy, 'Coleridge as Editor: *The Watchman* and *The Friend*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Fred Burwick (Oxford, 2009), 144–64, 153; H. D. Traill, *English Men of Letters: Coleridge* (London, 1925), 35.
5. *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (5 vols, Oxford, 1965) i. 3; see for instance John Thelwall, *The Tribune* (3 vols, London, 1795), i. 25, i. 166.
6. S. T. Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75, 2 (Princeton, 1970), 11; hereafter TW.
7. Cecil Thelwall, *The Life of John Thelwall* (2 vols, London, 1837), i. 273; Coleridge, in correspondence with Thelwall later that year, denied having implied any criticism specifically of Thelwall in this article: TW 98, cf. CL, i. 205.
8. Thomas Beddoes, *Essay on the Public Merits of Mr. Pitt* (London, 1796), 139.
9. Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing* (University Park, 2001).
10. John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford, 2000), 573–74.
11. *Politics for the People: or, A Salmagundy for Swine* (2 vols, London, 1794), i. 104.
12. Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, 104.
13. John Thelwall, *John Gilpin's Ghost; or, the Warning Voice of King Chanticleer: an Historical Ballad* (London, 1795); Damian Walford Davies, 'Capital Crimes: John Thelwall, "Gallucide" and Psychobiography', *Romanticism*, 18.1 (2012), 57.
14. *Cambridge Intelligencer*, 144 (April, 1796), 3; M. J. Murphy, 'Newspapers and Opinion in Cambridge, 1780–1850', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 6 (1972), 41; the opening editorial of the first issue supports 'the preservation of the just prerogatives of the Crown', and stresses Flower's desire to promote 'peaceable and constitutional' discussion: *Cambridge Intelligencer*, 1 (July, 1793).
15. Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Republican Politics and English Poetry, 1789–1874* (Basingstoke, 2005), 186.
16. For a discussion of *Politics for the People's* appeal to a plebeian audience see: John Barrell, 'Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s', *Romanticism on the Net*, 46 (May 2007). Accessed 17.11.2017 < <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ron/2007-n46-ron1782/016131ar/> > .
17. TW, 3; BL, i. 180–82; CL, i. 79; TW, xxxii–xxxv; Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years. Second Edition* (1988; Oxford, 2018), 158.
18. Michael T. Davis, "'I Can Bear Punishment': Daniel Isaac Eaton, Radical Culture and the Rule of Law, 1793–1812", in *Crime, Punishment, and Reform in Europe*, ed. Louis A. Knafla (Westport, 2003), 89–106, 90–91.
19. TW, 142–45; John Edwards, *Letters to the British Nation* (4 vols, London, 1791–92), iv. 70.
20. CL, i. 178; Robin Whittaker, 'Tourist, tradesman – or troublemaker? Coleridge's visit to Worcester, 1796', *Coleridge Bulletin*, 21 (Spring 2003), 47–54, 52.
21. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964), 52–53.
22. *Cheshire including Chester*, eds. Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper, and David Mills (Toronto, 2007), lxxvii.
23. *Morning Chronicle*, 8270 (April 1796), 4; *The Times*, 3556 (April 1796), 2–3; TW, 235.
24. Björn Bosserhoff, *Radical Contra-Diction: Coleridge, Revolution, Apostasy* (Newcastle, 2016), 102.
25. Nicholas Roe, 'Coleridge's Watchman Tour', *Coleridge Bulletin*, 21 (Spring 2003), 35–46, 41.
26. S. T. Coleridge, *The Watchman* (Bristol, 1795). British Library: Ashley 2408.
27. Samuel Bardsley, 'Miscellaneous Observations on Canine and Spontaneous Hydrophobia: to Which is Prefixed, the History of a Case of Hydrophobia Occurring Twelve Years after the Bite of a Supposed Mad Dog', *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester* (5 vols, Manchester, 1793), iv. 431–88.
28. S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75, 5

- (2 vols, Princeton, 1987), ii. 416; hereafter *Lects* 1808–1819.
29. CL, i. 126; David Hartley, *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (2 vols, London, 1749) i. 440.
  30. Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* (London, 2005), 57; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (London, 1651), 27.
  31. See for instance Göran Nerhardt, 'Incongruity and Funniness: Towards a New Descriptive Model' *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications*, eds. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (New Brunswick, 1996), 55–62, 55; John Moreall, 'Humor as Cognitive Play', *JLT*, 3 (2009), 241–60, 248.
  32. TW, 51; Kooy, 153; S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75, 7 (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), i. 184; hereafter *BL*.
  33. William Wooley, *The Benefit of Starving: or The Advantages of Hunger, Cold, and Nakedness* (London, 1792).
  34. Richard Hill, *A Detection of Gross Falshood, and a Display of Black Ingratitude; being an Answer to a Pamphlet Lately Published by some Evil-Minded Person, under the Name of Revd. William Woolley* (London, 1794), 27.
  35. *The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal, Enlarged* (108 vols, London, 1790–1825), xvi. 236.
  36. Accounts of several were printed in *The Watchman*. See for instance TW, 127–30, 143–45.
  37. Isaiah 1: 14. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford, 1997), 765.
  38. Felicity James discusses Coleridge's dissenting readership in: Felicity James, 'Writing in Dissent: Coleridge and the Poetry of the Monthly Magazine', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 3 (2006), 1–21, 4; see also Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric, 1770–1814* (Basingstoke, 2003), 101.
  39. Albert Barnes, *Notes: Critical, Explanatory, and Practical, on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (3 vols, Boston, 1840), i. 512.
  40. See for instance: 'To the Editor', *The Monthly Magazine: Or, British Register* (48 vols, London, 1796–1819), i. 18; TW, 374.
  41. S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Religion and Politics*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75, 1 (Princeton, 1971), 65–66.
  42. Richard M. Ward, *Print Culture, Crime and Justice in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 135; for a contemporary instance Coleridge may have read see *Morning Post*, 7198 (February 1795), 7; 'The Watchman', British Museum number 1873,0712.855, [www.britishmuseum.org/collection](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection). British Museum. Online. Accessed 19.11.2017.
  43. S. T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bollingen Series 75, 16 (6 vols in 3, Princeton, 2001), I. i. 227.
  44. Peter Pindar, 'The Tears of St. Margaret', *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 5480 (August 1792), 4.
  45. TW, 98.