

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

I have long wished to devote an entire work to the Subject of Dreams, Visions, Ghosts, Witchcraft, &c. in which I might first give, and then endeavour to explain the most interesting and best attested fact of each, which has come within my knowledge, either from books or from personal testimony.

(*F* II 117, II 145)

In spite of Coleridge's remarkable dedication to understanding dreams and dreaming, there have been very few studies dealing with his writings on dreams. There is no single collection of all of his dream cogitations; his thoughts remain scattered throughout his marginalia, notebooks, letters and formal writings. Nor has there been a comprehensive or contextual study of these dream writings. This book seeks to explore what Kathleen Coburn in 1979 rightly called a 'subject in itself'; the 'richness and variety of Coleridge's notes on sleep and dreaming'.¹ His insightful observations on the 'most interesting' features of dreams, visions and ghosts, gathered together in the following pages, reveal the extent to which he utilised his own dreaming experiences as well as those he encountered through his wide reading. My emphasis throughout is on discovering what Coleridge's contemporaries wrote and thought about dreams and dreaming, and the ways in which his own experiences often challenged these contemporary theories. I particularly focus on Coleridge's exploration of dreams and dreaming states in his notebooks, because these have not yet been systematically studied, and because they yield the richest, the most surprising and most comprehensive discussion of dreams in his writings.

Certainly, there have been some scholarly commentaries on Coleridge's thoughts on dreams. But such investigations have on the whole been essentially biographical; they are, for example, set in the context of his so-called opium addiction² or they have primarily

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

attempted to divine his character, or psychopathology, through a Freudian analysis of his dreams. Elisabeth Schneider's *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan* (1953) identified two of his important eighteenth-century dream sources, Andrew Baxter's *Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* and Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia*, but unfortunately she concluded that Coleridge was unoriginal in his approach to dreams.³ Patricia Adair's *The Waking Dream* (1967) also refers to texts which the poet read on dreams, but her emphasis remains narrowly focussed.⁴ Alethea Hayter's *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (1968), though more substantially concerned with the dreams themselves, trivialises their importance by attributing all their features to opium.⁵

Norman Fruman, in *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (1971), offers a detailed psychoanalytical reading of the poet's dreams which disparages his achievements and investigations in this field (Coleridge 'saw no moral connection between his dreams and waking life . . . he rigorously kept these two realms of his experience in separate compartments of the mind, thereby shutting off all possibility of achieving any revolutionary grasp of the meaning of dreams or any genuine understanding of himself').⁶ Paul Magnuson, in his study, *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (1974), discusses *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 'Kubla Khan', *Christabel* and *Remorse* as poetic nightmares personal to Coleridge, rather than as part of a wider contemporary debate on dreaming.⁷ David Miall's essay, 'The Meaning of Dreams: Coleridge's Ambivalence' (1982),⁸ acknowledges the importance of placing Coleridge's thoughts on dreams 'in the context of his period', and uses his historical insights to challenge the judgements of Schneider and Fruman.⁹ But while Miall touches upon the importance of Coleridge's contemporary writers on dreams, he does not explore sufficiently closely the detailed observations and wide scope of the poet's penetrating notes on dreams, or the extent to which his medical understanding of the topic challenged his notion of the poetic imagination.

In a general study of the Romantic period, J. R. Watson has argued that the Romantic poets were strongly interested in dreams because dreams recaptured a precious childhood; they revealed the Romantic imagination as 'sovereign, untrammelled and unquestioned'.¹⁰ Watson refers to the writings of some of Coleridge's contemporaries, but denies himself genuine historical insight by adopting a post-Freudian and psychoanalytic point of view and in

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

the process risks etherialising and infantilising the Romantic imagination.

In recognition of the value of exploring Coleridge's thoughts on dreams and dreaming in the historical context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both the intellectual context of contemporary medicine and the close relevance of that medicine to an understanding of concepts of the imagination are key issues of my study. This book explores the fascinating ways in which Coleridge draws on and contributes to some of the major scientific, medical and philosophical issues of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In pursuing the topic over four decades of great significance in the history of science and medicine, he read widely and deeply across a staggering range of works; and he was often engaged with various theories and topical controversies which were directly relevant to his enquiries into dreams and dreaming. Although his concept of the imagination is frequently discussed in relation to a poetic sphere, it is clear from his engagement with a variety of medical and scientific works that the imagination for Coleridge is also medical, physical. His own diseased body figured predominantly in both his experience and his understanding of dreams, and is a constant presence throughout the bulk of his dream writings. He clearly acknowledged the close connections and associations between dreaming and the poetic, imaginative creativity and genius. But this ethereal, spiritual, idealistic concept of the imagination was not the only construction of it that he acknowledged. In adopting a fundamentally physiological doctrine of the source and production of dreams, Coleridge was also able to explore the physiological, medical nature of the imagination.¹¹ This uniquely physiological approach to dreams and the imagination is certainly, as Coleridge himself acknowledged, one of the 'most interesting' features of his projected enquiry into the subject of dreams and dreaming.

Throughout the Romantic period, many poets, prominent scientists and philosophers were intrigued by dreams and dreaming processes. Sir Humphry Davy, a close life-long friend of Coleridge's, kept a dream journal. Although he had a fervent interest in the subject and intended to write a major work on dreams as well as a short novel, 'The Dreams of a Solitary', neither project was ever completed.¹² Bristol physician Thomas Beddoes had a keen interest in dreams, giving serious discussion to the topic in his *Hygeia* (1802–3), and

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

assisting Coleridge in treating certain cases of extreme nightly disturbances and reverie (*CL* 1 257). Robert Southey kept records of his dreams, detailing a series of disturbing and often amusing ones in a 'dream-book'.¹³ He recorded his dreams throughout 1807 and 1808, then lost his dream-book until 1818, when he again resumed the task. Unlike Coleridge, Southey viewed his dreams as curiosities, taking more interest in recording than in analysing them. Thomas De Quincey claimed that he penned his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* more to reveal the mysteries and potential grandeur of dreams than to outline the dangers and pleasures of opium (*Confessions* 87).

Percy Bysshe Shelley began to write an essay on dreaming, but was allegedly forced to stop because he was 'overcome by thrilling horror'.¹⁴ The poet's general efforts to understand processes of mind and dreams are evidenced in his poems: many contain elaborate dream sequences and visionary moments (notably *Alastor*, and *Prometheus Unbound*). Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt and George Crabbe also joined in speculation as to the origin and meaning of dreams.¹⁵ John Keats displayed his interest in dreams and sleeping states in poems such as *Endymion* and *Sleep and Poetry*. When he met Coleridge in 1819, he recorded that they talked about many things, including different types of dreams, nightmares and nightingales.¹⁶ Recognition of Coleridge's understanding and experience of dreams is also suggested by Joseph Blanco White's dedication of a poem on dreams and night visions to him.¹⁷

The eminent scholar of dream history, Ludwig Binswanger, has suggested that there have been three great periods of heightened interest in and debate surrounding dreams: the classical Greek era, the Romantic era, and the era marked by the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.¹⁸ Coleridge was perceived by many of his contemporaries to be an embodiment of this rekindled interest and fascination with dreams and processes of mind. To many of the second generation of Romantic poets, Coleridge was 'a good-natured wizard, very fond of earth, but able to conjure his aetherialities about him in the twinkling of an eye'.¹⁹ He was the man who wrote 'Kubla Khan', 'The Pains of Sleep' and *Christabel*. The Shelleys, Lord Byron and John William Polidori read aloud from the poems of the as yet unpublished *Christabel* volume as they wrote and discussed ghost stories and recent medical and science discoveries in Geneva.²⁰ Coleridge was a man Thomas De Quincey described as a

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

poet, a philosopher, an opium-eater, a prolific dreamer: a man whose poetry was ‘shrouded in mystery – supernatural – like the “ancient Mariner” – awfully sublime’.²¹ Leigh Hunt remarked that Coleridge’s body was ‘very metaphysical and very corporeal’; his countenance was ‘boy-like’, which Hunt considered ‘very becoming to one who dreams as he did when he was a child’.²²

Dreams and dreaming were topics which attracted intense scrutiny and endless conversational exchange; the subject was a frequent topic at dinner parties. At one such gathering in 1812, Coleridge lectured guests ‘for some time’ on the reasons why distressing circumstances always seem doubly afflicting at night, when the body is in a horizontal position. He told his listeners that ‘the effect originated in the brain, to which the blood circulated with greater force and rapidity than when the body was perpendicular’.²³ Years later, in a lecture of 1818, he noted how the ‘mind is never perhaps wholly uninformed of the circumstantia in Sleep – by means of the feeling, the temperature / &c. – People will awake by removing Lights’ (*Lectures* II 207). The singling-out of the physical and physiological, characteristic of Coleridge’s thinking on dreams, adds a complex dimension to his thoughts on dreaming. Dreams for him were very physical, bodily experiences, and at times pathological – even though he also used them to symbolise the powers of the poetic imagination. The imagination was not, then, merely the evoker of sublime dream visions, as noted by Charles Lamb and many others:²⁴ in essence, as this book will reveal, the Coleridgean imagination also partook of a corporeal, physiological and often diseased existence. In the earliest of his notebook dream writings, Coleridge presents his dreams as intimately connected with his (diseased) bodily processes.

The most familiar concept of the Coleridgean imagination is one which is spiritual, poetic, idealist. Read with sections from *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge’s notions of the imagination have been chiefly thought to be expounded through a handful of poems, including *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, ‘Kubla Khan’ and the conversation poems. This imagination unites reason with sense and understanding; it achieves a ‘heightened awareness’, a ‘creative insight into truth’.²⁵ It is an idealist, transcendent imagination, firmly located in the theoretical, the intangible.²⁶ However, what clearly unfolds throughout this book is that the predominance of the corporeal in Coleridge’s dreams has significant implications for our

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

understanding of the imagination. It is through a contextual study of an astonishing array of specialised materials in the notebooks and marginalia that the truly complex nature of the imagination emerges. Coleridge's understanding of it was deeply influenced by contemporary medical debates throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. These debates centred on discoveries of new natural forces; on medical experiments which revealed that some bodily processes continue after life is apparently extinguished; on processes of body and mind and the role of voluntary and involuntary components of both body and mind processes. Impassioned debates took place between medical men such as John Brown and William Cullen in the 1790s and John Abernethy and William Lawrence from 1814 to 1820 on the nature of life, physiology and anatomy; and there was increasing speculation regarding the role of nerves, spirits and fibres within the human body.²⁷

Coleridge's profound intellectual affinities from the early 1790s are with medicine and the organicist life sciences for which the body and the senses, and their relatedness to the mind, were matters of central concern and spirited debate. He read many works which clearly demonstrated the imagination in a medical capacity, capable of both curing and causing disease. This medical notion of the imagination was hotly debated throughout the last decades of the eighteenth century and particularly in the decade leading up to the publication of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. As I explore in greater detail in later chapters, what is particularly fascinating throughout the later part of the eighteenth century is that both poets *and* medical writers entered the debate concerning the nature of the imagination. On this score there was no clear distinction between theorists and practitioners of medicine and those of poetry. A medical man might also be a poet, and vice versa, and topics that engaged medical men were equally interesting to poets: Mark Akenside, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, Erasmus Darwin and Thomas Beddoes were all prominent men of letters who were also medical practitioners by training.²⁸ What emerges from this book is that by looking at the historical contexts of Coleridge's thinking about his dreams, about the body, and in particular his preoccupations with his own disease and pain, all his work, including his literary work, can be seen in a new perspective.

It is in his private notebooks that he most explicitly and frequently

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

explores dreams and dreaming states. Many notebook entries are characterised by ellipses, a sense of urgency, a sceptical and ironic playfulness, or a note of personal despair. They are often couched in a rhetoric of uncertainty, evasion, self-contradiction and self-justification. Perhaps it is because of the complexity and unusually private, raw nature of Coleridge's many notebooks that so few studies have been primarily concerned with them. Nevertheless, they constitute a rich, diverse and unique resource of his many interests: the notebooks are the place where he queries, argues, jokes, despairs and partially resolves concerns about his dreams. The specialised notebook form proved the best suited for his exploratory design; in his notebooks he arrives at his complex and remarkable understanding of the physical and medical nature of dreams, dreaming and the imagination.

Because Coleridge's dream writings are exploratory and meditative, they often raise many more questions than they answer. For this reason, I do not argue that Coleridge had a cogent *theory* of dreams. The experience of his dreams is quintessentially private, impervious to outside theories. To write, record and discuss dreams is to remain captive within their internal, uncertain frameworks, with all the ambiguous things they present and re-present. This is a problem that Coleridge faced as he attempted to analyse and record his own dreams with an objectivity that could never escape their purely subjective nature.²⁹

Coleridge's opinions on the nature of dreaming changed and shifted in emphasis many times over the course of his lifetime as he attempted to understand dreams as a totality rather than as isolated instances. His vicissitudes render a chronological, progressive study of his thoughts on dreaming problematic. He never claimed he had stumbled upon the one true theory which would explain his dreams or dreaming in general. On the contrary, he was often frustrated by the continual perplexity of his dreams; he struggled with their mysteries, but never claimed that he had unriddled them. At times, it is as though he was too painfully aware of the complexity of dreams, the intricately internal nature of dreaming, the plethora of possible explanations, and his own limitations as an interpreter or theoriser:

O vanity! I have but a few hours back announced myself to my friend, as the author of a SYSTEM of Philosophy on Nature, History, Reason, Revelation; on the Eternal, and on the Generations of the Heaven and the Earth, and I am unable to solve the problem of my own Dreams! After

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

many years' watchful notice of the phaenomena of the somnial state, and an elaborate classification of its *characteristic* distinctions, I remain incapable of explaining any one Figure of all the numberless Personages of this Shadowy world. (*CL* VI 715)

This letter was written in November 1827, after Coleridge had one of his 'terrific' and 'fantastic' dreams, an experience so vivid and unsettling that he exclaimed that he 'would have required tenfold the imagination of a Dante to have constructed it in the waking state'. Yet, as this book aims to show, the deeply problematic nature of the material and the irresolvable dilemmas it afforded him did not prevent him from studying the 'shadowy world' as few others have done. Many of Coleridge's 'characteristic distinctions' on the subject of dreams are for the first time here critically discussed, including the pivotal role that his body played in dreaming: the body as a cause of dreams, as a feature of the language in which dreams were expressed, and as an undeniably real part of the distressing nightmares he so frequently endured.

The following chapters explore some of the 'most interesting' (*F* II 117) features of Coleridge's explorations of dreams and dreaming. In chapter 2, his observation that dreams occur within their own unique space, and that time, distance and touch are altered in this dreaming space is discussed. Other chapters consider Coleridge's deliberations on the language of dreams and his investigations into the many differing types of dreams and dreaming experiences. His efforts to understand the origins of his dreams and the peculiar role his body and the imagination played in them are explored in the later chapters. And it is in these later chapters that the unique role of the imagination in his dream writings is revealed: the imagination is both poetic and medical and plays a crucial role in dreaming states. Debates concerning the medical powers of the poetic imagination throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century are contextualised within Coleridge's explorations of his dreams and reveal the extent to which the imagination belongs just as much to medical theory as to poetic theory. What follows is a portrait not only of how Coleridge interpreted his dreams according to contemporary theories, but also of the fascinating ways in which he attempted to construct for himself a distinctly personal account of the many still unresolved mysteries of the shadowy world of dreams and dreaming.

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Dreaming in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Dreams in their development have breath,
 And tears, and tortures, and the touch of joy;
 They leave a weight upon our waking thoughts,
 They take a weight from off our waking toils,
 They do divide our being; they become
 A portion of ourselves as of time,
 And look like heralds of eternity;
 They pass like spirits of the past, – they speak
 Like Sibyls of the future: they have power –
 The tyranny of pleasure and of pain;
 They make us what we were not – what they will,
 . . . What are they
 Creations of the mind?

This questioning opening to Byron's 'The Dream',¹ written in 1816, succinctly touches upon many of the fundamental and often contradictory opinions on the nature of dreams and dreaming during the Romantic period. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was no consensus on the origin and meaning of dreams. Some argued that they were miraculous, potentially divine events. Many believed that dreams revealed the powers of the imagination and that dreaming was a form of poetic inspiration.² Others argued that they were entirely attributable to the dreamer's physical or psychological constitution. In seeking to formulate his own answers, Coleridge turned to the writings of antiquity as well as those of his contemporaries. From ancient writers he gleaned the notion that dreams have the potential for prophecy and can 'speak like Sibyls of the future'. In the works of some of his contemporaries he encountered the theory that dreams are caused by spirits taking possession of the dreamer for short periods during sleep. Other contemporary writers emphasised the ethical dimension of dreams, claiming that they could impart moral lessons, while others

Cambridge University Press

0521583160 - Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination

Jennifer Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

maintained that dreams derived from the digestive process. Contemporary writers he consulted included Andrew Baxter, Erasmus Darwin, David Hartley, and men he labelled ‘Scotch Metapothecaries’: Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith and Dr John Brown (*CN* iv 5360 and n; see also *CL* ii 767–8). He also found in contemporary medical texts, works of physiology, philosophical treatises, mystic and magical writings enduring topics which touched upon his broad interest in dreams: the nature of pain, the relations between mind and body in dreaming states, and the role of psychological and intellectual processes, including the imagination, in causing and curing diseases. These ideas were all vigorously discussed throughout his lifetime, but particularly during the 1790s.

Some of Coleridge’s earliest sources were Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and Galen, and the influential interpreter of dreams, Artemidorus. Two broad approaches in the classical world still had credibility in the eighteenth century.³ The first was supernatural, sometimes termed irrationalistic:⁴ dreams were thought to be messages from gods; they could take the form of visions or oracles; and their importance was evidenced by the intrinsic role of incubation and ritual. The second major understanding was a rationalistic one, in which dreams were seen as natural phenomena, the result of the dreamer’s physical and physiological processes.⁵

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, dreams are given to humans via two dreaming gates. In describing her dream, Penelope tells Odysseus that dreams may originate from either a gate of ivory or a gate of horn:

dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfilment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfilment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them.⁶

This powerful and enduring schema of two dreaming gates could not easily resolve the question of which dreams were deceptive and which were potentially valuable, prophetic. As Homer’s Penelope suggests, dreams were sometimes too awkward and confusing to be definitively categorised. The challenge was to differentiate between those that were significant and those that were not.⁷

Because the Greeks regarded dreams so highly, they and the