

# ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’: Coleridge’s Multiple Models of Interpretation

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The ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ has excited, baffled, and frustrated readers since its initial publication in 1798. Dr. Charles Burney famously offered the following remarks about the poem: ‘though it seems a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and incoherence, there are in it poetical touches of an exquisite kind.’<sup>1</sup> Burney’s mixed reaction to the poem summarizes the conflicted response shared by many nineteenth-century readers. While contemporary critics no longer find the poem either unintelligible or incoherent, they still differ in their interpretations of the poem. My particular interest concerns the various emendations made to the ‘Rime’ over the years. Perhaps no two versions have been more discussed than the first 1798 printing, and the later 1817 version, where Coleridge added a Latin epigraph and also attached marginal glosses from a fictional editor. Many scholars, including Elinor Shaffer, Jerome McGann, and Anthony Harding have evaluated these versions not only in relation to each other, but also in conjunction with Coleridge’s growing interest in eighteenth-century Biblical criticism. Harding suggests that in the ‘Rime’ Coleridge attempts to create a poem similar to the primitivism of Biblical narratives, but in a distinctly British poetic form and setting: ‘The poem reflects and questions eighteenth-century models of the origin of myth and religious belief. It does so by placing the hypothetical primitive man of Enlightenment theory in an environment where... natural phenomena work on his senses and appear to form themselves into patterns of ‘benevolent’ and ‘malevolent,’ punitive and redemptive action.’<sup>2</sup> Other scholars such as Lawrence Lipking and Kathleen Wheeler have considered how the 1817 glosser adds a later and more learned voice to the poem, as a contrast to the Mariner. I am interested, however, in how eighteenth-century Biblical criticism had a direct influence on Coleridge’s own ideas about the differences between the primitive mind and the modern mind regarding structures of interpretation. In the 1798 version of the ‘Rime’ Coleridge’s illustrations of the primitive mind are in the tradition of eighteenth-century Biblical criticism. Coleridge’s additions of epigraph and gloss to the 1817 version of the ‘Rime’ also seem to be informed by ideas of the higher critics of the eighteenth century, and dramatize the act of interpreting texts.

Coleridge’s familiarity with eighteenth-century Biblical criticism has been well documented. George Whalley points out in ‘The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge’ that in September 1796, Coleridge borrowed Bishop Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, which systematically explored the poetic nature of the sacred Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Burney, *The Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony J. Harding, *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 57. Henceforth RM.

<sup>3</sup> George Whalley, “The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge 1793-8,” *The Library* 4 (1949) : 123.

addition to Lowth, Coleridge was familiar with a number of other English Biblical scholars, including Gilbert Wakefield. However, Coleridge's interest in Biblical criticism was not confined to English scholars. Elinor Shaffer has illustrated how Lowth's contacts with Johann David Michaelis, Chair of Philosophy at Göttingen, mediated English and German Biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Because Michaelis's texts were available in England, Coleridge was able to read his *Introduction to the New Testament* two years before his trip to Göttingen. (KK 22) In addition, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Michaelis's successor in the chair of Philosophy at Göttingen, was lecturing during Coleridge's visit to the university, and was influential in shaping Coleridge's understanding of the higher criticism. Eichhorn was the first critic to use the term '*die höhere kritik*,' but the influence of earlier Biblical scholars is evident in his criticism, and the scholarship of other higher critics.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult, however, to discuss the higher criticism as a general movement because, as Elinor Shaffer points out, 'no full history of the higher criticism exists in English, and no full history of the critical movement in England exists in any language' (KK i).

Despite the lack of a comprehensive history of eighteenth-century Biblical criticism, the authors of this tradition display similar critical goals. These Biblical critics used historical methods to demonstrate that the Bible was founded on older texts. One of their methods was tracing the sources of the Scriptures, from most primitive to more contemporary, as Michaelis attempts to outline in his *Introduction to the New Testament*. He begins with Syriac versions and continues to consider the many different texts, including Coptic, Arabic, Persic, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the early eighteenth-century critics, such as Lowth, were concerned with exposing the merits of the primitive nature of Biblical poetry. Later Biblical critics were also interested in determining the 'origin, character, and relative age' of the Scriptures, and the higher critics specifically used historical methods of textual comparison and philological inquiry to discover these origins.<sup>7</sup> Each of these different methods for understanding the Bible influenced Coleridge's own ideas about poetry and interpretation, both in the 1798 version of the 'Rime' and in the later version of 1817.

In the 1798 version of the 'Rime,' Coleridge's ideas about the primitive mind, as reflected in the Mariner's simple descriptions of his journey, are clearly informed by his understanding of Biblical critics such as Lowth and Wakefield, who, in the tradition of early eighteenth-century criticism,

<sup>4</sup> Shaffer points out that Michaelis was instrumental in the German translation of Lowth's *Lectures*, and Michaelis's notes to the German edition were translated into English in Herbert Marsh's translation of Lowth. E. S. Shaffer, *Kabla Khan' and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 22. Henceforth KK.

<sup>5</sup> Herder prefaces his *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* by explicitly mentioning Lowth's influence, while simultaneously expressing his own work's difference from Lowth's. Herder, J.G. *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. Trans. James Marsh. Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Johann David Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Herbert Marsh (Cambridge: printed by J. Archdeacon Printer to the University, 1793). Henceforth INT.

<sup>7</sup> Rev. A. H. Sayce. *The Higher Criticism and the Verdict of the Monuments* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894), 8.

emphasized the spare and pure character of primitive language. In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, Lowth describes the verse of the Old Testament as poetry which, 'on account of the exact and vivid delineation of the objects which it described, [is] excellently adapted to the exciting of every internal emotion... of captivating the ear, of directing the perception to the minutest circumstances, and of assisting the memory in retention of them.'<sup>8</sup> Lowth identifies a passage in Genesis that exhibits these characteristics:

Hadah and Sillah hear my voice;  
Ye wives of Lamech hearken to my speech;  
For I have slain a man, because of my wounding;  
A young man, because of my hurt.  
If Cain shall be avenged seven times,  
Certainly Lamech seventy and seven. (LSP I 89)

Based on the division of the lines into three distiches, and the simple and exact manner of expression, Lowth suggest that this passage 'will be easily acknowledged an indubitable specimen of the poetry of the first ages' (LSP 89). These same characteristics of balanced lines and simple narrative are evident in the 1798 version of the Mariner's narrative.

Ne dim ne red, like God's own head,  
The glorious Sun uprist:  
Then all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird  
That brought the fog and mist.  
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay  
That bring the fog and mist,<sup>9</sup>

As with the passage from Genesis, each pair of lines completes one discrete thought, and the Mariner uses simple, yet evocative language, to convey his story. This passage from the 'Rime' also illustrates another element that Lowth attributes to Hebrew poetry, namely the imagery of light and darkness. The Mariner compares the sun to 'God's own head,' and he and the crew interpret the emergence of the sun from the fog as a good omen.<sup>10</sup> The Mariner's description of the sun is reminiscent of the imagery used by Hebrew poets. 'The images of *light* and *darkness* are commonly made use of in all languages to imply or denote prosperity and adversity... But the Hebrews employ those Metaphors more frequently' (LSP I 131). Imagery of light and darkness is certainly universal; however, Lowth suggests that Hebrew poetry stands out

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. Trans. G. Gregory (New York: Garland Publishing, 1971), 80. Henceforth LSP.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner 1798," *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works I*. vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), lines 97-102. Henceforth PW

<sup>10</sup> As the narrative progresses and the grave consequences of the Mariner's action become apparent, Coleridge complicates the idea of the sun as a good omen. Just a few lines later he compares the sun to the moon and attaches the adjective 'bloody.' However, the imagery of light and darkness is still evident. 'the bloody sun at noon,/ Right up above the mast did stand,/ No bigger than the moon.' (PW 112)

because it expresses this imagery in 'bold and daring' language that is 'perspicuous, clear, and truly magnificent' (LSP I 131).

Lowth's lectures also illustrate how the term 'primitive' is not a derogatory description of the nature of Biblical poetry. Biblical poetry was primitive in vocabulary and poetic flourishes; it was in no way inferior to more modern poetry. In fact, the opposite was the case. The simple vocabulary and evocative language of primitive Hebrew poets was considered by many eighteenth-century scholars as more pure and exact than modern poetry, especially because of its ability to excite emotion. When recounting the late eighteenth-century emphasis on the primitive, M.H. Abrams explains that Lowth considered the Hebrew writings 'to be 'the only specimens of genuine and primeval poetry.'<sup>11</sup> Wakefield, another Biblical scholar, agrees with Lowth's characterization of Hebrew poets, and suggests that the Evangelist's narratives were similarly simple and vivid: 'They delivered, not a visionary system of ingenious conjecture, no intricate and refined theories, but a simple narrative... They adhered to ocular proof, or the most unsuspected information.'<sup>12</sup> Lowth and Wakefield focus on how the simple nature of ancient people both affects the way they interpret their environment and increases the emotional reaction that their narrative stimulates in their audience. It is not surprising that Coleridge, like many other late eighteenth-century writers, became interested in the idea of the simple and expressive poet of Scripture, as Harding explains: 'Romantic so-called primitivism... led many poets to imitate the spareness and emotional intensity they found in Biblical poetry. For such poets, the fact that the Bible was traditionally treated as a canon was arguably less important than the discovery that it was nevertheless open not only to imitation but reinterpretation, if all imitation is not in fact a form of reinterpretation.'<sup>13</sup>

Coleridge's characterization of the Mariner follows this tradition anticipated by Lowth and Wakefield. Much as the evangelists recount their stories according to 'ocular proof,' the Mariner similarly guides readers through his story based on visual perception. By looking at the oft quoted verses where the Mariner describes the early part of his journey, we learn much about the limited perspective of the uneducated sailor:

The Sun came up upon the left,  
 Out of the Sea came he:  
 And he shone bright, and on the right  
 Went down into the Sea.  
 Higher and higher every day,  
 Till over the mast at noon— (PW 25-30)

<sup>11</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1953), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Wakefield, *An Essay on Inspiration: considered chiefly with respect to the Evangelists* (Warrington: Printed by William Eyres, 1781), 38. Henceforth EI.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony J. Harding, *Coleridge and the Inspired Word* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 6.

We learn from this passage that the ship is on a southern course. We know this, not because the Mariner overtly states it, but by the observations he makes about the position of the sun. Here the Mariner is not trying to illustrate poetically that the ship is traveling south; rather, he is accurately narrating the events as he perceives them. The Mariner's simple recounting of his visual observations, without any interpretation, recalls Wakefield's description of the Evangelists: 'They delivered, not a visionary system of ingenious conjecture, no intricate and refined theories, but a simple narrative, in a familiar and inartificial style, without rhetorical embellishment, without digressions, without argumentation, without inferences, without remarks: but with ever internal character of credibility' (EI 38). By describing the environment rather than assigning specific terms, the Mariner's verse also resembles the poetry of the Old Testament. Lowth describes Hebrew poetry as follows: 'Poetry, in this rude origin... owed its birth to the affections of the mind, and had availed itself of the assistance of harmony, it was found, on account of the exact and vivid delineation of the objects which it described, to be excellently adapted to the exciting of every internal emotion, and making a more forcible impression upon the mind than abstract reasoning could possibly effect' (LSP I 80). Like the Hebrew poets, the Mariner does not attempt to categorize or interpret the events he witnesses; he only explains them in terms of his visual perception.

In addition to identifying the primitivism exhibited by Biblical narrative, Biblical critics were also interested in the idea of the prophet as a poet and eyewitness who was especially suited to vivid description because of his proximity to the event that he describes. Lowth explains the Hebrew understanding of prophets both as poets and galvanizing speakers: 'The word *Nabi*, 'he writes,' was often used by the Hebrews in an ambiguous sense,' and 'it equally denoted a Prophet, a Poet, or a Musician, under the influence of divine inspiration' (LSP II 14). Lowth also suggests that such verse 'possesses all that genuine enthusiasm, which is the natural attendant on inspiration; it excels in the brightness of imagination and in clearness and energy of diction... it often is very happy in the expression and delineation of the passions, though more commonly employed in the exciting of them'(LSP II 68-69). Lowth believed that the primitive poetry exhibited by the prophets of the Bible had great emotional power and also a singular ability to animate the audience's emotion. Similarly, Coleridge's interest in prophets is explicitly illustrated in his *Lectures on Revealed Religion*:

Prophets are necessary to Revealed Religion as perpetual Testimonies... but the full force of such preter-natural Evidence can operate on the Eyewitness only. Their influence gradually decreases and becomes more and more faint and then the accomplishment of predicted Events is substituted and discovers to us the truth of the Revealed Doctrines to us by a sufficient though not so overpowering a Light. (LPR 152)

Coleridge's interest in the account of the 'Eyewitness' is evident in his own characterization of the Mariner. Jack Stillinger has pointed out the prophetic attributes of the Mariner in the 1798 version of the poem: 'In this first printed version, the sole authority for the events and the moral is the Mariner himself, and it is a manifestly powerful authority: the Wedding-Guest departs 'like one that hath been stunn'd/ And is of sense forlorn.'<sup>14</sup> Stillinger's remarks about the 1798 version of the 'Rime' both focus on the Mariner as the authoritative eyewitness, and also recall Coleridge's own comments about prophets from his *Lectures on Revealed Religion*.

The Mariner's tale is not only similar to the accounts of Old Testament prophets, but it also echoes Michaelis's description of Matthew. Michaelis explains that the supernatural nature of the events that Matthew witnessed did preclude him from accurately recounting his experiences.

St. Matthew, considered as a mere human historian, was surely able to give a true and faithful account of the doctrines which he had heard delivered by Christ. If they appeared to him extraordinary, and contrary to his former notions, he might have accompanied them with a comment expressive of his former prejudices yet these prejudices would not have rendered his memory so weak, as to be unable to retain the doctrines, which he had actually heard, not his hand so untrue, as to be unable to record them. (INT iii 103)

Michaelis illustrates that Matthew certainly would have been affected by the 'extraordinary' acts of Christ; however, being witness to these supernatural acts does not make his account unreliable. The Mariner's preternatural experiences have similarly not discredited his account, but in fact compel the detailed telling of the tale.

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd  
With a woeful agony,  
Which forc'd me to begin my tale  
And then it left me free.

Since then at an uncertain hour,  
Now oftimes and now fewer,  
That anguish comes and makes me tell  
My ghastly aventure. (PW 578-585)

Like Matthew, the Mariner is an eye-witness to extraordinary events who is able to accurately recount his experiences for others. In addition, this passage illustrates the Mariner's resemblance to Hebrew prophets, as an individual 'forc'd' to share his singularly preternatural experiences.

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 69.

In the 1798 version of the 'Rime,' Coleridge acts as a poet by endowing the Mariner with the simple and prophetic poetic qualities that eighteenth-century scholars assigned to the authors of Biblical narrative. In the 1817 version of the poem, Coleridge complicates his depiction of the Mariner as a primitive poet by adding the comments of a fictional editor in the margins of the Mariner's verse. This marginalia indicates a significant shift in Coleridge's poem. By attaching the commentary of a fictional editor, Coleridge begins to act as critic, and not only a poet. Just as the Mariner dramatizes the way that primitive people assign meaning to events in the tradition of eighteenth-century Biblical criticism, the glosser illustrates the way a more modern mind interprets and evaluates texts. However, it is the historical methods of higher criticism of the Bible that offer insight into the glosser's character as a model of modern methods of interpretation. The Mariner observes events and judges them based on the beneficial or harmful ways they affect his environment, and then poetically conveys these descriptions to the wedding guest, and, by implication, to readers. Conversely, the glosser acts as a critic, evaluating the Mariner's verse by using previously obtained knowledge. As Lawrence Lipking points out in, 'The Marginal Gloss,' the glosser judges events by applying his own seventeenth-century standards.<sup>15</sup> But the glosser is more than just a later historical foil to the uneducated Mariner; his methods help Coleridge to illustrate, and to comment on the type of person attempting to elucidate authentic medieval texts, and by extension any person interpreting a text.

It must be recognized, however, that the glosser is not Coleridge's ideal interpreter, because he often imposes meaning on the text not explicitly stated in the Mariner's verse. It is this gap between his evaluations and the Mariner's own narrative that compels the reader to take an active part in interpreting Coleridge's poem. This gap is illustrated in the difference between the Mariner's superstitious understandings of phenomena and the glosser's pseudo-scientific hypotheses. In his marginalia, the glosser attempts to assign specific meaning to the supernatural events of the Mariner's tale. The Mariner explains that a spirit is to blame for the unhappy condition of the ship:

And some in dreams assured were  
Of the spirit that plagued us so :  
Nine fathom deep he had followed us  
From the land of mist and snow.<sup>16</sup>

The Mariner makes no attempt to identify what kind of spirit this is, except that it originates from the south. The editor, however, has no problem illustrating the exact character of the spirit, and he even includes suggestions about where we can find more information on this specific type of spirit:

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Lipking, "The Marginal Gloss." *Critical Inquiry* 3 (Summer 1977) : 609-655.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Sibylline Leaves* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1990), lines 131-134. Henceforth RSL.

A spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more. (RSL lines 131-134)

The editor applies knowledge derived from texts to explain rationally the events the Mariner experiences. As Anne Mellor points out, the editor, 'with a precision that creates the illusion of scientific certainty,' describes the spirits in much greater detail than the primitive Mariner.<sup>17</sup> Just as Coleridge himself was evaluating the Bible according to both the sacred text and also eighteenth-century criticism, so too the reader of the 'Rime' must evaluate the Mariner's verse and the editor's commentary in tandem in order to interpret the poem.

We know that Coleridge was interested in the activity of the reader from his comments in the *Biographia Literaria*. He writes: 'The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself' (BL II 14). Coleridge's interest in compelling reader interpretation is not surprising considering the Biblical critics he was reading. Eighteenth-century Biblical critics were strong proponents of interpretation. Wakefield, for example, specifically encouraged reader-interpretation of the Bible.

Nor let us be deterred from the investigation of any article of our religion, or any proposed scheme of faith, by frivolous pretences of presumption and conceit, so scrupulously urged by some, who (it may be) from a sincere humility, and a profound veneration for the word of God, are unintentionally the most dangerous enemies of Christian liberty... Can this, I say, be hazardous to ourselves, or detrimental to our religion? No: if Christianity be true, she will derive new honour and accumulated evidence of her celestial extraction from every disquisition. (EI 5-6)

In this passage, Wakefield explicitly recommends that individuals should actively interpret the Bible, while Coleridge urges reader-interpretation implicitly, through the very structure of the 'Rime.' He undoubtedly intended his nineteenth-century readers to evaluate the entire text of the 'Rime' according to the knowledge of both their own time period and also knowledge of the historical context in which Coleridge sets his poem. These readers would have also understood the attempts of the seventeenth century to elucidate all texts, from the Bible to ballads. Understanding this context, the reader then becomes the creator of almost a second marginalia that interprets and criticizes not only the Mariner's text, but also the editor's comments along with the verse.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 147.



Coleridge himself was using this same process of evaluating ancient text in tandem with more contemporary commentary when he studied the higher critics. And perhaps it is not coincidental that Coleridge added the gloss after his trip to Göttingen, where he was exposed to the scholarship of higher criticism, and specifically the lectures of Eichhorn.<sup>18</sup> As noted earlier, we also know that Coleridge later owned Eichhorn's *Einleitung ins Alte Testament*, and Coleridge's marginalia reflect his own evaluations of Eichhorn's scholarship. Just as the reader of the 'Rime' must create his own interpretation of both the verse and the commentary, Coleridge was physically writing marginalia beside Eichhorn's commentary of the Bible. The original text of Genesis is framed by Eichhorn's commentary, which in turn is framed by Coleridge's own interpretation of the two together. Eichhorn suggests that Genesis is comprised of different documents: "Several chapters of Genesis carry the clear imprint of single independent documents, the authors of which have no detectable hand in the other parts. Thus the second chapter from the fourth verse onward and the entire third constitute such an individual separate document. The second from the fourth verse onward had no connexion with the first."<sup>19</sup> Based on this commentary and the text of Genesis, Coleridge creates his own interpretation of these passages from the Old Testament. 'It seems plain enough to me,' he writes, 'that the 1<sup>st</sup> Ch. –II.4 contains the physical theory of the Earth, the III<sup>rd</sup> the moral or spiritual theory or philosopheme of Man/ Both make one Double-nut' (M II 389).<sup>20</sup> Coleridge here takes Eichhorn's ideas about the different authors of Genesis, evaluates this suggestion of multiple authorship in relation to the actual text of the Bible, and then produces his own unique interpretation derived from both the primary source and the commentary. Coleridge encourages readers of the 'Rime' to apply the same dual interpretative process.

The higher critics were also interested in constant interpretation and reinterpretation of literary works based not only on the text proper, but also on established commentary, and new discoveries. Harding explains that Biblical critics were beginning to employ this study of process:

Biblical revelation was no longer thought to be static and remote

<sup>18</sup> Clement Carlyon remembers Coleridge's exposure to Eichhorn at Göttingen: 'Coleridge either attended Professor Eichhorn's lectures on divinity, or had access, which I rather believe to have been the case, to the notes of some other student' (191). Clement Carlyon. *Early Years and Late Reflections*, Vol I, London: Whittaker and Co., 1856.

<sup>19</sup> Eichhorn in, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia II*, 388.

<sup>20</sup> The significance of these passages was also in Coleridge's mind in November 1829: 'It seems to me clear, that Ch I to v. 4. C. II is a scheme of Geogony, containing facts and truths of Science adapted to the language of Appearances and the popular notions grounded on Appearances – It is though-out literal – and gives the *physical* Creation / then from v.4. of C. II comes the *Moral* Creation – the formation of the *Humanity*. – and the institutions arising out of it, with the moral cause, the spiritual process of the Fall, the *Centaurization* of Man, – & that the whole is symbolic or allegorical –' (CN 6129). This entry clearly expands upon Coleridge's Marginalia to Eichhorn. Although this entry postdates the 1817 'Rime,' it nevertheless emphasizes the critical way that Coleridge was interpreting the Bible, as Graham Davidson points out: 'Coleridge discriminates between what may be taken literally and what symbolically, and it is certainly characteristic that he reads many events in both Testaments, particularly the miracles, symbolically.' Graham Davidson, "Coleridge and the Bible," *The Coleridge Bulletin* 23 (Spring 2004), 75.

from history but was something (as McGann puts it) 'expressed and later re-expressed through commentary. Gloss, and interpretation by particular people at different times according to different lights.' There can be no such thing as an objective and timeless account of a miracle, a prophecy, or a conversion experience. (RM 48)

Coleridge believed that primitive texts, like the Scriptures, evolved through interpretation. McGann explains that in the *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Coleridge argues that, 'the Scriptures are not an unmediated and fixed Biblical text but an evolved and continuously evolving set of records which include the Church's later glosses on and interpretations of the earlier documents. The entire project of textual transmission and elucidation is a symbolic, revelatory act.'<sup>21</sup> We can apply this assertion to Coleridge's own 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' because in order for his text to evolve, Coleridge needed an editor to include his temporally specific interpretation of the text. In the case of the 'Rime,' it is the contemporary scholar who will adapt the poem and its marginalia to his own time and circumstances.

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<sup>21</sup> Jerome J. McGann, "The Meaning of the Ancient Mariner," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981) : 49-50.

Coleridge first published his famous ballad, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", in *Lyrical Ballads*, his 1798 joint effort with his close friend and colleague William Wordsworth. The collection's publication is often seen as the Romantic Movement's true inception. It was published anonymously - a move that contradicted its intensely personal and subjective contents. Purportedly, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" was to be a joint effort on both poets' parts; Coleridge attributed the shooting of the albatross as well as several lines to Wordsworth. Nineteen years later Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Poetic Technique. Professor Belinda Jack. We've been listening to Beethoven's ninth symphony. Mays is so absorbed in the Coleridge corpus that his own critical writings have a Coleridgean nuance. It wasn't until after writing *The Ancient Mariner* that Coleridge first went to sea, on a ship bound for Hamburg. (Beer, p.185) In a letter he revealed his attentiveness to his surroundings: About 4 o'clock I saw a wild duck swimming on the waves - a single solitary duck - You cannot conceive how interesting a thing it looked in that round objectless desert of waters. (Collected Letters, I, p.426). It's as though his vision of things has been shaped by the Rime. Samuel Taylor Coleridge - poet, critic, opium addict - wrote his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in 1798, a time when long poems still began with a short synopsis called the *Argument*. I have always loved Coleridge's weird poem, with its archaic language recalling medieval travel stories, and its globetrotting narrative reaching back to Odysseus and the recent tales of Captain Cook, and forward to the imperial age to come. *Record Your Rime* coincided with Irish actress Fiona Shaw's current dramatic interpretation of the poem at BAM, which the *Financial Times* calls "a riveting, virtuoso performance." Subsequently Coleridge, for the 1800 edition of the work, eliminated many Gothic elements and antiquated words. However, in an 1817 edition of his collected poems, *Sybilline Leaves*, Coleridge replaced some of the language he had previously deleted. On its simplest level, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a tale of crime, punishment, and redemption: a Mariner shoots an albatross (a bird of good fortune) and is gravely punished by an extraneous force for this act. Beyond this basic level of comprehension, critics seldom agree on a standard interpretation of the poem. With the richness and variety of the imagery, the complexity of the symbols, and the multiple levels of meaning, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* still retains its magic for the reader. *Author Biography. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria* SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE was born October 21, 1772, the son of a vicar. When Coleridge was nine, his father died, and his mother sent him away to boarding school, often not allowing him to return home for holidays and vacations. As an adult, Coleridge would idealize his father, but his relationship with his mother would always be strained. While Wordsworth contributed a greater number of poems to the work, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* received the most attention. Throughout their friendship and careers, Wordsworth would always be the more productive poet, while Coleridge's work would gain the notice of critics and readers.