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Recommended Citation

Steven E. Jones, "'Supernatural, or at Least Romantic': the Ancient Mariner and Parody," *Romanticism on the Net*, 15 (August 1999).

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'Supernatural, or at Least Romantic': the Ancient Mariner and Parody [*]

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1

An ancient literary practice often aligned with satire, parody "comes of age as a major comic expression during the Romantic period," as Marilyn Gaull has observed, the same era that celebrated and became known for the literary virtues of sincerity, authenticity, and originality. [1] Significant recent anthologies of Romantic-period parodies make the sheer bulk and topical range of such imitative works available for readers and critics for the first time, providing ample evidence for the prominence of the form. [2] The weight of evidence in these collections should also put to rest the widespread assumption that parody is inevitably "comic" or gentler than satire, that it is essentially in good fun. At least during the politically volatile Romantic period, as Linda Hutcheon has asserted, parody "is almost always aligned with satire; that is to say, parody is the literary shape taken by social satire." [3] The very act of imitation implies a closeness and familiarity rather than a mere dismissal of the target. This is why many parodies have historically been seen as a form of flattery, tributes to their originals. As Hutcheon says elsewhere, parody is "imitation with a critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways," producing in some cases "scornful ridicule" and in others what looks like "reverential homage." [4] Nonetheless, Romantic-period parody often served as a powerful mode of topical satire—a particularly galling and intimate way of ridiculing a target by stealing and distorting one's very voice.

2

It is often observed that, considered etymologically, "parody" can mean either "beside" or "against" another poem, and that parodies can serve either to pay tribute to or to ridicule the targeted work. Samuel Taylor Coleridge approached the same matter from a slightly different direction in the following epigram for anonymous inclusion in Robert Southey's *Omniana*:

Parodies on new poems are read as satires; on old ones, (the soliloquy of Hamlet for instance) as compliments. A man of genius may securely laugh at a mode of attack, by which his reviler in half a century or less, becomes his encomiast. [5]

This way of putting it helpfully focuses on historical context as necessary to any interpretation of a parody's tone and purpose; but it is important to notice that it also emphasizes by implication the canonical status of the targeted work. The difference between parodic "satire" and parodic "compliment" is time, according to Coleridge, the distance traveled from a "new" to an "old" poem. But the chosen example of an old poem is telling; in 1812, when Coleridge wrote the passage, Shakespeare had begun to stand at the head of an English vernacular canon. The kind of old poem that both survives the test of time and is at the end still considered worthy of parody is likely to be a work of recognized "genius," which is to say, a canonical work. Coleridge's gnomic and ironic remark suggests that whether a parody counts as satire or compliment depends in part upon the process of canonization, a process in turn dependent upon the kind of critical judgments offered by parody. Such parodic judgments identify the works worthy of being remembered and taken seriously enough to be parodied in the first place, and help to define the qualities of those works that make them worthy of (even negative) attention. There is a double circularity at work in this scheme: parody helps to shape the context that partly determines the effect of other parodies; and, in a kind of poetic Doctrine of the Elect, only the man of genius can rest secure in eventual victory, in the promise that his satiric "attackers" will eventually, in the due course of cultural change, be transformed into his encomiasts. The canonical have the last laugh. But whether a work is worthy of such canonization only becomes known when the work is no longer "new" but still considered significant, literally imitable. In most cases, true security is only certain after the death of the author. Coleridge's parable speaks to the dialectical relationship of satire and poetic expression in literary history. Parody and satiric commentary not only help to cull and determine the works that remain in the field, sometimes they help through their overall contributions to its critical reception to shape a paradigm-setting, movement-defining major work even after the fact of its publication—as in the case of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

3

This essay looks through the lens of parody at one of Coleridge's most characteristically "romantic" works, his famous ballad of the supernatural, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Along with the other so-called "Mystery Poems"—"Christabel" and "Kubla Khan"—this is among his most significant generic contributions to the developing idea of Romanticism, the kind of work that comes through a kind of synecdoche to stand for the whole movement as it was conceived. According to his own statement of intentions, these poems most clearly represent his "supernatural, or at least romantic" mode that was to serve as a pendant to Wordsworth's "natural," rustic simplicity in the *Lyrical Ballads* project. [6] In what follows I will place the *Rime* in the context of Coleridge's changing conception of the work and his own satiric practice, including his propensity for self-parody and the parody of his fellow-poets. In the late 1790s Coleridge joined a literary trend, producing supernatural works always on the verge of self-parody. Over the course of the following three decades he attempted to distance himself from the more fashionably romantic works of the same generic family—and from those qualities in his own works, representing them as part of a more metaphysical kind, constructing a philosophically coherent corpus fit for a place in the canon. Parody, broadly conceived, plays a role at every stage of this process.

The Ancient Mariner and the Romantic Canon

4

My choice of poem is no accident. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner is rooted in Coleridge's most "romantic" early works (as the term was understood at the time) but is also the exemplary Romantic poem (in the canonical sense). Wordsworth's and Coleridge's own accounts of the composition and publication history of the ballad make up one of the founding myths of English Romanticism, beginning with their attempts to collaborate on it and publish it in the Monthly Magazine, a way to pay the expenses of a walking tour. Coleridge quickly took over the composition, but was then caught up in the larger plan for a volume of poems on rustic and supernatural subjects. In the event, the Rime was the first poem readers encountered in the first edition of Lyrical Ballads in 1798. It was also one of the works in that collection that contemporary readers would have immediately recognized as fashionably "romantic" in the German style, a kind of gothic horror ballad then popular in the magazines. As an anonymous reviewer looking back from twenty years later noted, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

appeared at a time when, to use a bold but just expression, with reference to our literary taste, 'Hell made holiday,' and 'Raw heads and bloody-bones' were the only fashionable entertainment for man or woman. Then Germany was poured forth into England, in all her flood of skulls and numskulls: then the romancing novelist ran raving about with midnight torches, to shew death's heads on horseback, and to frighten full-grown children with mysteries and band-boxes, hidden behind curtains in bedrooms . . . [7]

This reviewer is essentially correct about the origins of the Rime: it began as a romantic horror ballad in the popular sense, and only later was made over into the quintessentially Romantic poem. [8] When it first appeared, it was in a self-consciously archaic form, and in these terms Wordsworth's brief Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads offered a kind of pre-emptive apology for it, saying that it was "professedly written in imitation of the style, as well as of the spirit of the elder poets." Privately, Wordsworth said that he believed it had "upon the whole been an injury to the volume," that "the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on;" he wrote an apologetic note for its appearance, near the back of the collection, in the 1800 edition. [9] Between 1798 and 1817, Coleridge continued to revise the poem, producing a number of different versions, but by far the most significant version is the one he prepared for publication in his own Sibylline Leaves of 1817.

5

During the intervening years the poem and its author became famous. Coleridge's brother-in-law, Robert Southey, wrote one of the earliest reviews of the Lyrical Ballads, a scathing attack satirizing the Ancient Mariner as a "Dutch attempt at German sublimity;" another friend, Charles Lamb, strongly disagreed at the time, saying that it was on the contrary a successful attempt to "dethrone German sublimity," and confessing elsewhere that he "was never so affected with any human Tale." [10] Even some critics who could on occasion be highly acerbic towards Lake School poetry professed admiration for the ballad, most notably John Gibson Lockhart, who said that this "most wonderful" of the poems in Sibylline Leaves was the most Coleridgean: "From it alone, we are inclined to think an idea of the whole poetical genius of Mr. Coleridge might be gathered, such as could scarcely receive any important addition either of extent or distinctness, from a perusal of the whole of his other works." [11] The anonymous Monthly Review writer cited above, while attacking the German influence and lurid poetry of the ballad, quotes other passages with approval, specifically avoiding what he calls "the horrors of the poem." In The Spirit of the Age William Hazlitt summed up the positive view of the ballad and located its place in Coleridge's oeuvre:

Of all Mr. Coleridge's productions, the Ancient Mariner is the only one that we could with confidence put into any person's hands, on whom we wished to impress a favourable idea of his extraordinary powers. Let whatever other objections be made to it, it is unquestionably a work of genius—of wild, irregular, overwhelming imagination, and has that rich, varied movement in the verse, which gives a distant idea of the lofty of changeful tones of Mr. Coleridge's voice. [12]

Hazlitt describes the poem in terms that would later be seen as essentially Romantic ("a work of genius—of wild, irregular, overwhelming imagination") and associates it with the author's name and voice, the authority under which it is to enter the canon. [13] Notice as well how his terms of sometimes equivocal praise—"wild, irregular . . . rich, varied movement"—anticipate, acknowledge, and answer the very kind of criticism (those "other objections") Southey and others made of the poem. Hazlitt's description participates in making the poem into what Coleridge called it (recorded in Table Talk): "a work of . . . pure imagination." [14] Among the so-called younger generation of Romantics the poem became a touchstone of themes and techniques, narrative and lyrical. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it has retained a place of preeminence in the canon and has entered the public consciousness and the culture at large, producing its own extensive academic Midrash of critical commentary and a long chain of multiple editions, versions, imitations, and parodies.

6

That process of commentary and canonization was begun by Coleridge himself in collaboration with the poem's audiences, even before he revised it for publication in 1817. In that decisive, authoritative version he added as a kind of integrated paratext the famous marginal gloss, as if in the hand of some later (but still "antique") hermeneut. By doing so, as well as through his own critical remarks in the Biographia Literaria and elsewhere, he in effect collaborated with readers, critics, and parodists in determining the form in which it would be handed on to the canon and literary history. The gloss, itself a parody of academic or monkish interpretation, has proven to be a continuous source of hermeneutic questions about the poem and about hermeneutics in general. It is by now a critical commonplace that the gloss offers a kind of enfolded dialectical or ironic perspective on the main text of the ballad, though critical disagreement persists as to how to read the precise tone of the marginal text. [15] For my purposes, it is enough to acknowledge that there are places in the text where the gloss opens up an ironic counter-voice on the main action of the ballad, in effect anticipating the poem's inevitable parodies. This may be discerned as early as the use of the word "Gallants" adjacent to the first stanza; but it is a clearer possibility in stanzas 9-10:

The bride hath paced into the hall,

Red as a rose is she;

Nodding their heads before her goes

The merry minstrelsy.

The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,

Yet he can not chuse but hear;

And thus spake on that ancient man,

The bright-eyed Mariner. [16]

The gloss merely says in deadpan fashion: "The wedding-guest heareth the bridal music; but the mariner continueth his tale." The simple discrepancy in tone between the agony of the Guest and the gloss-writer's imperturbability is potentially parodic, whatever Coleridge's specific intentions. Elsewhere, specific moral-theological judgments are offered, or quirky, seemingly personal, and sometimes over-obvious reactions are recorded. When the poem describes the ghastly appearance of Life-in-Death and her mate (III.10-11), the glossist simply observes, "Like vessel, like crew!" In other instances, the key discrepancy is between the pace of the ballad meter and of the glossist's terse remarks, as when the moon rises and two-hundred sailors one by one silently curse the Mariner and drop dead, told by the ballad in four full stanzas (the first of which is extra long at nine lines); synchronized with the slow motion of the "star-dogged Moon" (III.16), their souls fly away. The gloss, by contrast, moves quickly through three phrases: "At the rising of the Moon, . . . One after another, . . . His shipmates drop down dead." the parody here is a matter of style: a play between "scholarly" understatement and sentimental overstatement. It is difficult to separate intended from unintended ironic effects in the interpenetrating texts of gloss and ballad, but the possibility of parody—in the full range of its senses, from iterative tribute to allusive appropriation to satiric mimicry—is at least anticipated and subsumed in the structure of Coleridge's dialogic text of 1817. This merely brings to an initial climax (but does not end) a process of effusion and parody that was intimately bound up with the composition, revision, and reception of this most "romantic" of Romantic works.

Two parodies: 1819, 1989

7

What is it about the Ancient Mariner that parodists continue to find imitable and risible? Many of the work's parodies target the Ancient Mariner's family ties to the gothic ballad tradition, which persisted despite Coleridge's attempts to turn the poem into something of a higher kind. Especially after 1817, parodies offer a satiric perspective on the whole process of revising the poem, and thus on the making of Romanticism itself out of "romantic" elements in popular and fashionable literature. Looking at the poem through parodists' eyes is a useful dialectical exercise, and one that provides a counterweight to the institutionalized academic readings of the poem as a central text in the High Romantic canon.

8

From the many possible examples of parodies by others I select two representative works widely separated by era and cultural context—a poetic imitation from 1819 and a comic book adaptation from 1989. These serve first to dramatize the persistence of the poem's cultural capital into the late twentieth-century—and well outside the academy—but also to demonstrate the specific ways in which both parodies make much of what Coleridge had already provided in the way of dialogic and parodic openings, openings he himself responded to with revisionary moves even as he was creating them. Already in 1819 the Ancient Mariner—though a "new" poem still in terms of Coleridge's dichotomy—had achieved the kind of fame that turned the "satire" of any parody into something of a "compliment." The work's reception and legacy was shaped by the interaction of such canonizing compliment and satiric commentary.

I. 1819

9

Less than two years after the publication of Sibylline Leaves and only months before Lockhart's praise of The Ancient Mariner appeared in Blackwood's, an anonymous parody was printed whose title suggests a satire on Wordsworth along with Coleridge, "The Rime of the Auncient Waggonere." [17] Its author, David Macbeth Moir, would in quick succession also publish a parody of Christabel, purporting to complete the fragment. The effect of this parody is based on verbal mimicry and on various substitutions for elements in the original, but also on exploiting the discrepancies between gloss and main text.

IT is an auncient Waggonere,

And he stoppeth one of nine:—

"Now wherefore dost thou grip me soe

With that horny fist of thine?

"The bridegroom's doors are opened wide,

And thither I must walke;

Soe, by your leave, I muste be gone,

I have noe time for talke!"

Hee holds him with his horny fist—

"There was a wain," quothe hee,

"Hold offe, thou raggamouffine tykke,"

Eftsoones his fist dropped hee.

The gloss to the second stanza merely reads: "The waggonere in mood for chate, and admits of no excuse." So far this is very much like the effect in the 1817 original of discrepant tones and ironic understatement, but with coarser Northern slang in place of Coleridge's vaguely medieval or Renaissance language. At times this effect takes the form of slapstick bathos—though again, the original had provided the example and pointed the way:

"The wain is fulle, the horses pulle,

Merrilye did we trotte

Alonge the bridge, alonge the road,

A jolly crewe, I wotte:"—

And here the tailore smotte his breaste,

He smelte the cabbage potte!

The gloss merely repeats the event in a mindless refrain, with something of the pedantic long-windedness of the original: "The appetite of the Tailore whetted by the smell of cabbage." ("Tailore" is likely a pun on Taylor.) Coleridge's ethereal wedding music is brought down to the level of the cabbage (and the baser sense of smell), the social class of the wedding party is made clear, and the parody mocks the intrusion of quotidian details—and the body—into the melodramatic action and supernatural or psychological effects of the original ballad.

10

The main joke, emphasized by this play of gloss against text, turns out to be the blatant physical violence of the Waggonere, which satirizes the Mariner's violent act against the Albatross, but also generally punctures the metaphysical pretensions of the original. Coleridge's first version and what survives in 1817 of the gothic horror ballad decorum—whose conventions can compass ghost ships, waking corpses, and slimy things—are satirically debunked by the direct knockabout of the parody, as the Waggonere proves himself the kind of low ruffian who might be expected by Blackwood's readers to appear in a ballad.

"At lengthe we spied a goode grey goose,

Thorough the snow it came;

And with the butte ende of my whippe,

I hailed it in Goddhis name.

"It staggered as it had been drunke,

So dexterous was it hitte;

Of broken boughs we made a fire,

Thomme Loncheone roasted itte."—

Signaling that it is subtle enough to mimic Coleridge's archaic diction ("thorough"), the parody remains otherwise deliberately crude, thus taking aim at the whole Lake School's favorite poetic virtue of "simplicity." The power of the Waggonere to hold the Tailore as an audience begins to look increasingly like thuggish intimidation.

11

In "Part Second," as the Waggonere rides away, conventional balladic questions, including for a moment an allusion to the Albatross ("a foreigne bird"), come to a mundane anticlimax. As the gloss says: "Various hypotheses on the subject, from which the passengers draw wrong conclusions."

"Some saide itte was ane apple tree,
Laden with goodlye fruite,
Some swore itte was ane foreigne birde,
Some said it was ane brute;
Alas! It was ane bumbailiffe,
Riding in pursuite!

Not surprisingly, the Waggonere "complimenteth the bumbailiffe with ane Mendoza" (a special boxing blow): "Why star'st thoue soe?—With one goode blow, / I felled the bumbailiffe." So it is with less metaphysical than physical dread (what the gloss names "Corporal Feare") that this interlocutor says,

"I feare thee, auncient waggonere,
I fear thy hornye fist,
For itte is stained with gooses gore,
And bailiffe's blood, I wist.

The parody ends by tacking on an explicitly labeled, clumsy "Morale," thus going right to the heart of what was and remained perhaps the key interpretive question of Coleridge's poem, from the legendary comments of Anna Barbauld and for the next two hundred years. Making fun of the moralizing stanzas of the Rime, the parody's moral is rendered bluntly explicit. It simply cautions "foolish men" to avoid "bade companye," implying again the danger of treating too seriously ill-mannered low-life rustics like the Waggonere, demonstrating why it is better to avoid than indulge "simple" strangers on the road. Instead of a narrative of increasing mystery and wonder, the Waggonere tells an all-too mundane story of quotidian rough behavior. In the same way the whole parody demystifies with a vengeance (by caricaturing and domesticating) the exotic, "wild" atmosphere and machinery of the 1817 original, reducing the sublime to the ridiculous—with a brickbat.

12

Moir reads even the 1817 text as pretentiously romantic in its mystified supernaturalism; and he is aware of and willing to capitalize on the ironic openings provided by Coleridge's dialogic gloss. This revision was precisely the device through which Coleridge also enhanced the ballad's susceptibility to "Romantic" interpretations—as a metaphysically transcendent and aesthetically symbolic text. The parody returns to the half-buried ur-romantic qualities of the ballad, which persist despite Coleridge's attempts to revise them away; in fact it calls attention to how the layered revisions of the poem work to dress up the simple narrative events, thus encoding the shifting senses of "r/Romantic" as they apply to—indeed as they are in part defined by—Coleridge's poetry.

II. 1989

13

We find similar demystifications of the poem everywhere in the so-called "underground"—really only extra-academic—tradition of continuing parodies, illustrations, and popular adaptations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. One striking example is Hunt Emerson's 1989 comic-book version, which includes Coleridge's text in word bubbles and panel captions, according to comic book conventions, but also supplements it with additional speeches and parodies the text through its illustrations. [18] Emerson's no-holds-barred lampoon style originates in the underground comics of the early 1970s, and makes use of a conventional repertoire of psychedelic distortions, hallucinatory and surrealistic fantasies, and gleeful bodily humor, including puns and slapstick jokes of questionable taste. Within those conventions—in fact I would argue because it is within them—it offers a remarkable parodic tribute and satiric commentary on Coleridge's ballad, and

on its long reputation and vast store of accumulated cultural capital.

14

The comic's astute commentary is evident from the start in the frontispiece to the book, a brilliantly grotesque full-page representation of a textual passage in the 1797 version of the poem, later deleted by Coleridge as too luridly "German," in which the living-dead sailors raise their arms to burn as lurid torches:

A little distance from the prow
Those dark-red shadows were;
But soon I saw that my own flesh
Was red as in a glare.
I turn'd my head in fear and dread,
And by the holy rood,
The bodies had advanc'd, and now
Before the mast they stood.
They lifted up their stiff right arms,
They held them strait and tight;
And each right-arm burnt like a torch,
A torch that's borne upright.
Their stony eye-balls glitter'd on
In the red and smoky light.

1798; VI.485-98

Emerson cannily chooses to restore this deleted passage to his overall "text" by way of this silent image, thus foregrounding the kinship of the original poem to his own metier and form.

Figure



[Image pleine grandeur](#)

15

The panel could almost be an illustration of the nineteenth-century review quoted above, with its "Raw heads and bloody-bones" entertainments. Uncaptioned and wordless (except for the T-shirt on one of the figures), the image reminds us of the "silenced" text Coleridge deleted and in effect declares it as a measure of what is to follow, establishing the spirit and tone of the rest of Emerson's parody. It shows a line of five zombie sailors on the deck, with eyeless skulls, rotting flesh, protruding bones, and grotesque entrails, but the effect of horror is undercut with

numerous broadly comic details—an airhorn, opium pipe, chicken bone, aged cheese, and a dead bird—extending out of the skulls/brains, held aloft by extra hands, repeating the image of the burning fists. One holds what appears to be a frog, one a flaming cigarette lighter, the universal signal calling for an encore at rock concerts, and wears a ratty T-shirt reading "Bob Dylan World Tour 1795." In the center of the composition, the Albatross itself pecks angrily at a sailor's silly animal slippers. The slapstick anachronisms are licensed by the irreverence of the comic book form and by the mode of parody itself (and implicitly by the theme of the undead). In fact, the flouting of historical boundaries is only one way the parody targets the stuffy academic ownership of this text. As if in anticipatory defiance of conventional distaste, one of the sailors thumbs his nose at us in the frontispiece tableau.

16

In his playful treatment of the grotesque and macabre, as if in a dream or drug-induced hallucination, Emerson exploits the distant family resemblance between this counter-cultural art form and Coleridge's own opium-induced variations on the gothic. The mixture of horror and humor is also profoundly true to the contradictory effects of Coleridge's ballad from the start—but especially after the gloss was added for the 1817 version—effects of which Moir's 1819 parody is well aware. The exaggerated sensibility and "supernatural" and sublime pyrotechnics of late eighteenth-century gothic balladry, novels, and theater already, at their inception, opened themselves up to the possibility of caricature and parody by their very nature. By design, at least among the artists who began at the time systematically to use these effects for the purposes of art, they were self-consciously in excess—sentimental, passionate, lurid and wild in their imaginative intensity—in a word, "romantic." Defining themselves as "against" or "beside" conventional morality and decorum, such expressions come into being as part of a "parodic" relationship to the status quo, which is easily enough turned back upon them, reversed in actual parody. These "outsider" qualities, still present in fossil form within the long history of the Rime's reception, are brought out by the historically distant and yet generically consonant, exaggerated and distorted psychedelic exuberance, of Emerson's comic-book style.

17

Emerson places Coleridge's gloss as an "argument" at the beginning of each part of the poem, but he also "glosses" the text himself in various ways, first of course in the images, which often comment on the text, but also in additional speeches put in the mouths of the characters, and finally in completely new interpolated sequences, bits of comic business that comment on the "real" plot like theatrical asides or Aristophanic parabases to the audience, as if improvised by actors performing a well-known script. One of the funniest of these is his depiction of the poem's early plot crisis—the actual shooting of the Albatross. Emerson has the Mariner use his cross bow but with a suction-cup tipped arrow. He repeatedly fires at the bird and misses in a series of snapshot images, panel by panel. When he is finally hit, the Albatross hams it up, reeling and staggering around the deck, one panel at a time, overacting a burlesque-melodramatic dying scene, the arrow protruding ridiculously from its head.

Figure



[Image pleine grandeur](#)

18

The staring sailors form a stone-faced audience to this performance at first, listening to the moral-mongering speech in word balloons ("martyred to man's dominion! . . . DEAD!"), but finally grow frustrated, until the Mariner silently and grimly returns with a large gun and blasts the bird in the final panel. The comic timing, using rhythmic transitions between the closely-articulated panels, is impeccable. But what is so successfully parodic about this interlude is the way it targets the tropes of sensibility inherited by Coleridge with his chosen form. From the poem's initial reception through much of twentieth-century criticism, it has been clear to readers that the "bird of ill-omen" has to bear an inordinate weight of emotional significance in the narrative. The "dying" of Emerson's Albatross is a pop cliché straight out of Tex Avery's animated cartoons, for example, but ultimately derived from the same kind of sentimental melodrama that was popular in the 1790s. The comic-book bird is both a sentimental hero and its own long-winded exegete; in one sense the gun-toting Mariner acts on behalf of countless readers, frustrated with the sententiousness of the critical tradition and the seemingly disproportionate significance attached to the poem's ornithological protagonist. A wicked satiric relief results from watching the feathers fly from this most famous Coleridgean symbol.

19

Similarly, at the poem's strange climax ("Part Fourth"), Emerson parodies the famous blessing of living things by the Mariner. The Albatross is very much alive again ("Aw—give us a break, boss—there aren't many good parts in literature for albatrosses," it pleads), hanging around the Mariner's neck. Emerson indulges in an outrageous visual pun on "spring of love" (the Mariner's heart protrudes from his chest on a spring), and a punning reply to sneezing water snakes ("bless you"). At the conclusion of the poem, Emerson further demonstrates his awareness of the

poem's history of interpretation. First, there is an extraordinary sequence of twenty-one separate panels across two pages in which the Mariner recites as if onstage the famous lines summarizing the purported moral of the poem ("O Sweeter than the marriage-feast . . . He prayeth well who loveth well . . ."). Then, Emerson provides another silent graphic interlude. The Wedding Guest—obviously sadder and wiser, in fact looking properly "stunned"—wanders along the road until he is tapped from behind by the revived Albatross, still wearing the suction-cup arrow but now carrying a beggar's tin cup. The Wedding Guest drops two coins into the cup, then watches as the bird walks away, presumably to join his nemesis the Mariner on the road, both itinerant opportunities for hapless charitable interlocutors. The final two stanzas of the poem, in which the Mariner turns and goes on his way, are illustrated in a 1/3-page borderless panel by Emerson's caricature of Coleridge himself, quill in hand, completing the poem in a state of laudanum-intoxication.

Figure



[Image pleine grandeur](#)

20

The poet's wicked grin suggests a conspiracy of satire with the comic book artist, and in fact Emerson seems to have caricatured himself, as well, making a cameo appearance earlier in the text as the drunken Hermit. It is as if the narrative's lurid gothic effects, arcane symbolism, and narrative ambiguities were all part of a plan of self-parodic poetic effects that were merely imitated, illustrated, and exaggerated by Emerson.

21

The reception of a canonical work is ultimately an uncontrollable process. A work like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (or, to name another example—and one inspired by the *Rime*—Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) possesses a sort of super-canonical status, claimed by popular or even mass culture as well as elite intellectual culture, that allows its reception to far exceed its official interpretations by academic critics, the contemporary clerisy. [19] Knowledge of such a work—often through a diverse array of versions and adaptations in various media—functions as a marker of cultural capital for a wide range of readers. Hunt Emerson's parody is aimed at this kind of wide audience, and is enjoyable on a number of levels. Though he includes the gloss and uses the basic text from 1817, he also makes good use of variants from earlier versions, and, as I have been suggesting, highlights the general gothic tone descended from the 1798 version. In this sense Emerson's comic book is a parody of the composite artifact we might call the vulgate *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. One of the reasons his parody works so well is that there is a happy consonance between the lurid effects of underground comic book art and the lurid effects of gothic horror balladry, the "gross and violent stimulants" Wordsworth denounced in the culture of his time and which found their way into Coleridge's ballad at its inception. Emerson brings out in high relief precisely those qualities of the *Rime* that Coleridge partly effaced in revision, but which still mark its family resemblance to Bürger's ballads or the plays of Kotzebue, [20] the very qualities that most opened it up to parody in the first place, as Coleridge was well aware.

The Roots of the Ancient Mariner: Mystery and Parody

22

Since John Livingston Lowes' exhaustive study, *The Road to Xanadu*, the question of the sources of the *Ancient Mariner* has become a singularly uninteresting topic, taken on its own. [21] In this case, however, I am interested in a particular kind of source, exemplified in Gottfried Bürger's "Lenore," which almost everyone agrees was an inspiration for Coleridge's ballad. I am interested less in the private imagination of Coleridge during composition, or in specific intertextual echoes (though they exist, particularly with the translations by Walter Scott), than in the generic family to which the two ballads belong and what this family tie tells us about how the "romantic" qualities of Coleridge's poem would have been perceived by his contemporary audience.

23

"Lenore" was translated by Thomas Taylor and published in the *Monthly Magazine* for March 1796 (as "Lenora"), whence it "awakened a native strain of 'spook' balladry," in England, as it has been pointed out, "at a time when an interest in gothic horror had reached a peak in both the novel and the drama." [22] The ballad had been imitated in the first place in 1773 from a Scottish original. Walter Scott translated it and reportedly said it inspired him to turn to poetry; it clearly helped to inspire his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803), and reinforced the widespread influence of Percy's *Reliques* and the ballad as a form. Among a more limited circle of influential writers, "Lenore" was a decisive text. An excited Charles Lamb called it to Coleridge's

attention in a letter of 6 July 1796. [23] In the same issue of the Monthly Magazine in which his translation appeared Taylor published a note arguing that Bürger's poetry was "singularly fitted to become national popular song" because of his "impetuous diction," and praised his style in terms now recognizably Romantic:

Bürger is every where distinguished for manly sentiment and force of style. His extraordinary powers of language are founded on a rejection of the conventional phraseology of regular poetry, in favour of popular forms of expression, caught by the listening artist from the voice of agitated nature.

pp. 117-18

Note that the gothic subjects of Bürger's works are never mentioned here. Instead Taylor stresses the vehicle of his vernacular style in terms that align him with the literature of sensibility—"manly sentiment" expressed in "the voice of agitated nature."

24

Lenore foresees her lover's death in "frightful dreams" and he eventually does return as a revenant to take her away with him. Thinking him dead, she then falls into "furious despair" when he fails to return home from the crusades:

"Go out, go out, my lamp of life;

In endless darkness die:

Without him I must loathe the earth,

Without him scorne the skye."

And so despaire did rave and rage

Athwarte her boiling veins;

Against the Providence of God

She hurlde her impious strains.

She bet her breaste, and wrung her hands,

And rollde her tearlesse eye,

From rise of morne, till the pale stars

Again did freeke the skye.

sts. 21-23

The melodramatic passions of horror ballads, like those expressed in this passage, would have been for many contemporary critics subsumed in the larger vogue for sentimental effusions, and both would have been seen as the result of a new dominance in literature of the popular taste.

25

Coleridge seems to have seen it this way, and to have been deeply ambivalent about the degree to which his own work was implicated in such taste. A February 1797 review of M.G. Lewis's *The Monk* attributed to Coleridge opens by declaring that "The horrible and preternatural have usually seized on the popular taste, at the rise and decline of literature."

Most powerful stimulants, they can never be required except by the torpor of an unawakened, or the languor of an exhausted, appetite. The same phaenomenon, therefore, which we hail as a favourable omen in the belles lettres of Germany, impresses a degree of gloom in the compositions of our countrymen. We trust, however, that satiety will banish what good sense should have prevented; and that, wearied with fiends, incomprehensible characters, with shrieks, murders, and subterraneous dungeons, the public will learn, by the multitude of the manufacturers, with how little expense of thought or imagination this species of composition is manufactured. But, cheaply as we estimate romances in general, we acknowledge, in the work before us, the offspring of no common genius. [24]

Though he decries the proliferation of such "powerful stimulants" (foreshadowing Wordsworth's attack in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) and suggests they represent a decline in taste in

England, he values this movement more highly in the German context, perhaps even hinting that it is the novelistic form—"romances in general"—that he particularly regrets; poetry may be another matter. And Coleridge goes on to praise *The Monk*, including its embedded gothic tale of the bleeding nun and the character of the Wandering Jew—extremely romantic devices. Coleridge's own professed weariness with gothic conventions cannot be taken at face value as his final or unambivalent judgment on the value of sentimental and romantic writing, but he did profess such weariness. One month after this review appeared, he wrote to William Lisle Bowles:

indeed I am almost weary of the Terrible, having been an hireling in the *Critical Review* for these last six or eight months—I have been lately reviewing the *Monk*, the *Italian*, *Hubert de Sevrac* & c & c—in all of which dungeons, and old castles, & solitary Houses by the Sea Side, & Caverns, & Woods, & extraordinary characters, & all the tribe of Horror & Mystery, have crowded on me—even to surfeiting.—[25]

If Coleridge was indeed becoming surfeited with "Horror and Mystery" in early 1797, it is likely because he had been devouring it over the past year—in order to prepare the reviews, as he implies in this letter, but also in pursuit of his own taste. A self-protective irony seems during these months to accompany a submersion in popular romantic literature, so decisive to the production of his so-called *Mystery Poems*. Here is a chronology of significant events: Bürger's "Lenore" appears (translated by Taylor) in March 1796 and Lamb and Coleridge correspond about it; less than one year later Coleridge writes the review and letter quoted above. Shortly thereafter (within months) he composes *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and begins to conceive of the *Lyrical Ballads* collection with Wordsworth. In fact, during this same time Coleridge published a collection of sentimental effusions (as sonnets were seen at the time) by himself, Lamb, and Lloyd, and then, shortly thereafter, parodied this very form himself in the *Monthly Magazine*, the same venue in which such sentimental poetry was often printed, and in which "Lenore" had appeared the previous spring. In the letter to Joseph Cottle (ca. November 1797) in which he first reveals that he has written *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—"a ballad of about 300 lines"—he also says that he sent to the *Monthly Magazine*

three mock Sonnets in ridicule of my own, & Charles Lloyd's, & Lamb's, & c & c—in ridicule of that affectation of unaffectedness, of jumping & misplaced accent on common-place epithets, flat lines forced into poetry by Italics (signifying how well & mouthis[h]ly the Author could read them, puny pathos & c & c—the instances are almost all taken from mine & Lloyd's poems—I signed them Nehemiah Higginbottom. I think they may do good to our young Bards.—[26]

These three "Sonnets, attempted in the Manner of Contemporary Writers" are apt parodies of the exaggerated simplicity and sentimental effusion that had recently been so much in vogue in Coleridge's own circle. It has been pointed out that the first poem works best as a self-parody.

PENSIVE at eve on the hard world I mused,
And my poor heart was sad; so at the MOON
I gazed, and sighed, and sighed; for ah how soon
Eve saddens into night! mine eyes perused
With tearful vacancy the dampy grass
That wept and glitter'd in the paly ray:
And I did pause me on my lonely way
And mused me on the wretched ones that pass
Oe'r the bleak heath of sorrow. But alas!
Most of myself I thought! when it befel,
That the soothe spirit of the breezy wood
Breath'd in mine ear: "All this is very well,
But much of ONE thing, is for NO thing good."
Oh my poor heart's INEXPLICABLE SWELL! [27]

This is funny in several ways, beginning with the "mouthish" italics which Coleridge explicitly called attention to. The limp surprise of "myself" in line 10, the sententiousness with which cliché is dispensed as if from the oracle in the quoted passage in lines 12-13, all contribute to a sharp satire on the gloomy narcissism, "breezy" pantheism, melodramatic sentiment, and exaggerated treatment of trivial things common in this poetry of romantic sensibility.

In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge cited these self-parodies as if in self-defense, in the midst of a discussion of what makes Milton's or Shakespeare's texts "essential poetry" (chapter 1). He admits that he had earlier "adopted a laborious and florid diction," but implies that he has now moved beyond such youthful romantic excess:

Every reform, however necessary, will by weak minds be carried to an excess, that itself will need reforming. The reader will excuse me for noticing, that I myself was the first to expose *risu honesto* [with honest laughter] the three sins of poetry, one or the other of which is the most likely to beset a young writer. So long ago as the publication of the second number of the *Monthly Magazine*, under the name of NEHEMIAH HIGGINBOTTOM I contributed three sonnets, the first of which had for its object to excite a good-natured laugh at the spirit of doleful egotism, and at the recurrence of favorite phrases, with the double defect of being at once trite, and licentious. . . .

I, 26-27

He then reprints the sonnets so the reader can see the evidence of his own skill at parody. "I myself was the first," Coleridge here claims, thus situating himself as the premiere parodist of the youthful romanticism so many had found so risible. This amounts to revisionist literary history in the guise of autobiography, a pre-emptive or talismanic self-parody protecting him against other parodies, then and now. In yet another such gesture, he appends an anecdote to the note containing the parodic sonnets, telling of an amateur versifier who claimed to have written a "severe epigram" on the *Ancient Mariner*. The joke is on the foolish would-be parodist, however, when Coleridge reveals to his readers that "to my no less surprise than amusement, it proved to be one which I had myself some time before written and inserted in the *Morning Post*."

To the Author of the *Ancient Mariner*.

Your poem must eternal be,

'Dear sir! it cannot fail,

'For 'tis incomprehensible

'And without head or tail.

I, 28

The act of telling the story is itself satiric, and reclaiming his authorship of the epigram returns the advantage to Coleridge of course, but this is nothing compared to the original act of writing the parodies. This footnote uses the press for the purposes of public relations, a parody of the puffery then common, in which authors or their literary agents would write the early reviews of their own works. Even in this small way satirizing himself in public only enhances Coleridge's reputation as someone worth satirizing. Most significantly, the humorous focus of the epigram is on the canonical status of the poem in question—which is linked (however humorously) to its opaque and incomprehensible qualities.

27

The *Biographia* is a self-promotional work, but it is also a self-parodic purge in the pursuit of a more mature style and reputation. By reprinting the sonnets and his own satiric epigram—then staking the claim to have been the first to parody his own youthful indiscretions—Coleridge places himself in 1817 on a plane far above such flaws of sentimentality. In fact, "doleful egotism" and excess in diction were charges that continued to be leveled against Coleridge's poetry, as was incomprehensibility. The revisionism of these passage works by exaggerating the differences between then and now, the 1796-98 and 1817, in order to elevate the latter as a new era giving rise to a new species of poetry in Coleridge's oeuvre.

28

The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was open to the same sort of charges Coleridge leveled at the sonnets. There is a general consensus by about 1817 that the romantic excesses of the Lake School as a group consisted in "sickly sentimentality," the tendency "to invest trifling subjects with an air and expression of great importance and interest," and to use vernacular language in exaggerated ways, "expressions which are merely vulgar or ridiculous"—all these terms come from an 1817 review of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as it appeared in *Sibylline Leaves*. [28] From his self-parodic stance, Coleridge is well aware of all this. I would argue that even in 1797 he was writing romantic poetry with an ironic edge, a self-conscious hint of the self-parodic tendencies of such writings. The Higginbottom sonnets attest to this, but it is also discernible from within Coleridge's romantic poetry, as the reviewer quoted above seems half-consciously to recognize. Speaking of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he says that it "has always appeared to us in the light of a very good caricature of the genius of its author."

It displays, in fact, all the strength and all the weakness, all the extravagances and eccentricities, all the bold features, and peculiar grimace, if we may so express ourselves, of his intellectual physiognomy, and in forming an opinion respecting the talents which he possesses, this composition may serve the very same purpose which an overcharged drawing of a countenance could answer

The *Nehemiah Higginbottom* sonnets merely reveal the degree to which Coleridge was prepared to parody before being parodied, even while producing his highly caricaturable romantic poetry of 1797-1800. This tendency to self-parody as a self-protective—but also canon-forming—gesture was perhaps most systematically pursued in the strategic self-representations of 1816-17,

which culminated in the revisions and revisionist self-editing of *Sibylline Leaves* and the *Biographia Literaria*. The revisions of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* substitute what is really a new poem—with a number of revisions including the added gloss and its layered effects, and in a new context as an independent poem published as the work of S. T. Coleridge—for the German-influenced horror ballad published in the 1798 collection. In each case satiric and parodic modes come to the aid of revisionist taste-making, helping Coleridge (and he hopes his readers) to make canon-defining distinctions. It is as if Coleridge first moved into and found himself occupying the same cultural niche as Bürger, Southey, the "minor" Wordsworth—the Nehemiah Higginbottoms of the period's fashionably sentimental literature—and then set about destroying the competition, exaggerating distinctions in order in effect to define a new species of poetic achievement to dominate that romantic niche: eventually, this species of poetry came to be identified as Coleridgean Romanticism. Purged through self-parody and the parody of others of weaker strains, elevated through theory and a ubiquitous layered hermeneutic contextualization, this is romantic writing more philosophical, transcendent, self-aware, serious—in a word, more worthy of the canon than mere popular "'spook' balladry" could ever hope to be. It remains resilient and thus dominant in part through a self-generated openness to parody from within and without, which, as Coleridge himself pointed out, in the due course of time and canonization, is one way to turn satire into encomium.

Notes

[*]

My general thanks to Jeffrey, for teaching me how to read comics.

[1]

Marilyn Gaull, "Romantic Humor: The Horse of Knowledge and the Learned Pig," *Mosaic* 9.4 (1976): 43.

[2]

Romantic Parodies, 1797-1831, ed. David A. Kent and D.R. Ewen (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992); and *Parodies of the Romantic Age*, ed. Graeme Stones and John Strachan, 5 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999).

[3]

Linda Hutcheon, foreword to *Romantic Parodies*, ed. Kent and Ewen, pp. 7-8.

[4]

Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) p. 37.

[5]

Coleridge's contributions to the *Omniana* in *The Collected Coleridge: Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) vol. I, p. 305.

[6]

Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press and Kegan Paul, 1983) vol. II, p. 6 (chapter 14).

[7]

Monthly Review (January 1819), 24-28; rept. Coleridge: the Critical Heritage, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970) pp. 399-412.

[8]

Though he is interested in Coleridge's use of vampirism, James B. Twitchell, in *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981) pp. 142-60, generally emphasizes the origins of the Mariner in the gothic milieu and also sees Coleridge as revising away from his original conception of the poem. On the particulars of those revisions, see Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 70-73.

[9]

Wordsworth to Joseph Cottle 24 June 1799, *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935) pp. 226-27.

[\[10\]](#)

Robert Southey, review of *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Critical Review* (October 1798) pp. 197-204; rept. in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 53-54; Lamb to Southey, 8 November 1798, in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr., 3 vols. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975) vol. I, p. 142; Lamb to Wordsworth, 30 January 1801, *Letters*, vol. I, p. 266. Interestingly enough in light of what I will argue below, Lamb disliked the supernatural ("miraculous") parts of the poem but was attracted to its representation of the "feelings" of the narrator.

[\[11\]](#)

J.G. Lockhart, "Essays on the Lake School," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1819): 3-12; rept. in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 436-51.

[\[12\]](#)

William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age; or, Contemporary Portraits*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930-34; 1932) vol. 11, pp. 34-35.

[\[13\]](#)

Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) pp. 113-38: "unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence" (p. 123). Cases such as Coleridge's, however, point to the role of the author as a "real person" with real agency who performs these shaping and defining functions.

[\[14\]](#)

Coleridge, *Table Talk*, in *The Collected Coleridge*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols (Routledge; Princeton: University Press, 1990) vol. I, p. 149.

[\[15\]](#)

Huntington Brown, "The Gloss to the Ancient Mariner," *Studies in Philology* 61 (1964): 669-88; Lawrence Lipking, "The Marginal Gloss: Notes and Asides on Poe, Valéry, 'The Ancient Mariner,' the Ordeal of the Margin, Storiella as She is Sung, Versions of Leonardo, and the Plight of Modern Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977): 609-55.; Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) pp. 22-23; David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in English Romantic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979) pp. 98-101; Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1985) pp. 135-72.

[\[16\]](#)

Coleridge, *The Rime of Ancient Mariner in Sibylline Leaves*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1990) pp. 1-39. Except in one case, noted parenthetically below (as "1798"), I cite the text in this edition. That passage is taken from *Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford and New York: Woodstock Books, 1990).

[\[17\]](#)

D. M. Moir, "The Rime of the Auncient Waggonere," in *Romantic Parodies*, ed. Kent and Ewen, pp. 163-68.

[\[18\]](#)

Hunt Emerson, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Crack Comics edition, colored by Carol Bennett (London: Knockabout Comics, 1989; see Emerson's Website: <http://www.largecow.demon.co.uk>). I am especially grateful to Hunt Emerson for his permission to reproduce the images from the comic book, and to Ronald Tabeta of Loyola's Center for Instructional Design for digitizing the images on short notice.

[\[19\]](#)

Frankenstein is an interesting example of a work whose popularity and authorship by a young woman worked to keep it at the margins of the canon, recognized but only as a "minor" work, until relatively recently. On the reception of canonical works in general and the authority of the vernacular canon from the eighteenth century, see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: the Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[\[20\]](#)

On the craze for Kotzebue and German melodrama, see David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[\[21\]](#)

Jonathan Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (London: Constable, 1927).

[\[22\]](#)

Marilyn Gaull, *English Romanticism: The Human Context* (New York: Norton, 1988) p. 269.

[\[23\]](#)

Lamb's letter is quoted and the relevance of Bürger and Coleridge's self-parodies discussed in Jonathan Wordsworth, ed., Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd, *Poems 1797* (Poole, U.K. and Washington D.C.: Woodstock Books, 1997).

[\[24\]](#)

Coleridge, review of M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*, in *The Collected Coleridge: Shorter Works and Fragments*, vol. I, pp. 57-65.

[\[25\]](#)

Letter to Bowles, 16 March 1797, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71) vol. I, pp. 317-19.

[\[26\]](#)

Letter to Cottle, ca. 20 November 1797, *Collected Letters*, vol. I, pp. 356-58.

[\[27\]](#)

Coleridge ("Nehemiah Higginbottom"), "Sonnets, attempted in the Manner of Contemporary Writers" in *Collected Verse Parody*, ed. John Strachan, *Parodies of the Romantic Age*. ed. Stones and Strachan, vol. 2, p. 51. Strachan's and Stones's introductory note cites many of the same primary sources and makes the same general point I am making here, that these sonnets reveal Coleridge "demonstrating a desire to put away childish things, or at least manifesting an anxiety about his poetic style" (p. 47).

[\[28\]](#)

Anon., review in *Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1817): 245-50; rept. in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 392-99. It has been suggested that even the 1798 version of the poem was more self-consciously parodic than contemporary readers realized. George Kitchin agrees that it is an imitation of gothic ballads, but also says that even "in its first version it had unmistakable burlesque elements, and this may explain Coleridge's complacency when the poem was parodied so cruelly by Maginn and others" (*A Survey of Burlesque and Parody in English*, Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1931) p. 226.

Auteur : Steven E. Jones

Titre : 'Supernatural, or at Least Romantic': the Ancient Mariner and Parody

Revue : Romanticism on the Net, Numéro 15, août 1999

URI : <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005872ar>

DOI : 10.7202/005872ar

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