Zapolya: Coleridge and the Werewolves

In the Introduction to Zapolya in his edition of Coleridge’s Poetical Works, J. C. C. Mays reviewed the conflation of historical and literary sources, the former no less conflated than the latter. “The names of nine of the twelve characters,” Mays observed, “are drawn from separate periods of Hungarian history.” Not just the names and incidents, but the very structure is an amalgam of genre, weaving together history, tragedy, and romance as it moves from “The Usurper’s Fortune” to the “The Usurper’s Fate.” The elements drawn from historical events (the Hungarian Civil War) and literary texts (Shakespeare’s Winter’s Tale and Cymbeline; Schiller’s Wallenstein and Don Carlos) are not integrated into a cohesive plot, for Coleridge gives emphasis to character over action, or rather to action defined by the attributes of character: innocence preyed upon by cunning, pious belief attacked by atheism, sensibility refuted by reason, justice corrupted by ambition and greed. These oppositions create multiple levels of dramatic tension played out in an atmosphere charged with suspicion and superstition. When Thomas Dibdin adapted Zapolya for the stage, he gave emphasis to the supernatural elements certain to appeal to the prevailing predilection for Gothic melodrama. “Mr. Coleridge’s favorite dramatic poem” is now called, so declared the large black letters of the playbill, “Zapolya: or, The War Wolf,” and
its central scenes are described as “Romantic Exterior of the supposed Cavern of the War Wolf” and “Interior of the War Wolf’s Cave.” There are no ghosts or werewolves in Dibdin’s adaption, nor any in Coleridge’s original. Several of the characters, however, are moved by a profound belief in the werewolf haunting the woods, and other characters, skeptical of the werewolf’s existence, use this belief and fear for their own advantage.

Among the many versions of the werewolf’s origin and identity in European folklore, Coleridge apparently turned to Hungarian tales, in which the werewolf was held to have obtained the ability to change into a wolf as a small child, after suffering abuse or abandonment. Akin to tales of the feral child reared by wolves, the boy in some tales goes hunting by night and can change at will from person to wolf. The curse can be lifted only if the boy recognizes his own reflection in the water. In many tales, the transformation from man to wolf is accomplished by wearing a cloak made from the wolf’s pelt. A man who has once committed murder might also be overcome by a bloodlust and turn into a nocturnal, wolf-like predator. For his account of Zapolya and Kiuprili surviving in a cave for 20 years, Coleridge also had a historical antecedent in the case of Sawney Bean and his incestuously bred family, who lived for 25 years in a coastal cave near Galloway, feeding themselves on the flesh of passers-by.

From Jeremy Taylor’s *The Worthy Communicant* (1674), Coleridge copied out a Latin passage describing the monster Scandal, whose offspring prey on innocence and devour human flesh, “to whom it is too pleasant to dip their snarling jaws in innocent blood, to feed upon a brother’s flesh and a kinsman’s vitals, and to strip a corpse of gnawed reputation.” Taylor returned to the metaphor of the beast to describe not vice but blind faith: such a person “sees like a man in his sleep, and grows as much the wiser as the man that dreamt of a Lycanthropy, and was for ever after wisely wary not to come near a river.” Although the passage might refer to the lore of the lycanthrope beholding his reflection in the water, Coleridge followed Samuel Johnson, who cited this same passage in defining lycanthropy as hydrophobia (literally, a fear of water), a disease caused by the bite of a mad dog, causing “a kind of madness, in which men have the qualities of wild beasts.” Coleridge was not troubled by Taylor’s equation of unquestioning faith with the diseased hallucination of being transformed into a beast of prey. Having found “The Passage […] cited in Johnson’s Dictionary under the word, Lycanthropy, but not explained,” Coleridge provides the missing connection: “A man bitten by a rabid animal believed to fancy himself turned into the animal that had bitten him. This was Lycanth[ropy].” Cruelty begets cruelty; the abandoned child becomes the wolf-man of the wild.