Chapter 4

Blank Faces and Fear of Ruin

The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmask her beauty to the moon

Hamlet 1, 3, 36–37

Living with his wife and baby Hartley in the village of Nether Stowey, and traveling in and out of London, Coleridge continues to watch women of all classes and to describe their appearances to his friends. He pays attention to their dress, bodies, carriage, size, weight, even as he is learning to value their conversation. Faced with the dazzling surfaces of the Georgian and Regency female, his admiration often stopped short at the body. In convivial mode he laughed heartily at female shapes and peculiarities: heavy inking covers the name of someone whose wife is “a nasty hard-hearted, hatchet-fac’d, droop-nos’d, eye-sunken, rappee-complexioned [old Bitch]” (CL 2, 880). Fat women amused him: “A superfluity of Beef! . . . Vulgarity enshrín’d in blubber!” And breasts always caught his eye: “Blessed, blessed were the breasts!” During the 1797–1802 years he wrote for the Morning Post, and charmed actresses, writers, and hostesses whose low-cut dresses provided a fleshy vista for his moist and protruding eyes. Indeed, given the eye-catching décolletages at the Bath Fashion Museum, it is remarkable that Coleridge alone talks about breasts; we should instead wonder why the other male Romantics rarely mention them. In this cosmopolitan interlude he dined at Charlotte Smith’s house (CL 1, 571), and several times with Mr. and Mrs. Barbauld (CL 1, 577); he spent a night surrounded by the three Allen girls, innocently, he writes his wife (CL 2, 890), while arguing the case that no one can promise to love just one person for the rest of his life; any “warm & wide-hearted man” loves many people (CL 2, 887–888). He boasted of his fashions and flirtations and dared Sara to scratch out the eyes of his admirers (Feb. 24, 1802; CL 2, 789). He enjoyed calling Mrs. Inchbald and Mrs. Barbauld “the two bald women” (Allsop 1, 203). Watching women not only led to amusement

A. Taylor, Erotic Coleridge
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but also to sympathy and thence to sexual arousal: “Sympathy itself perhaps may have some connection with this impulse to embody Feeling in action. The accumulation of these eye-given pleasure-yearnings may impel to energetic action/but if a woman be near, will probably kindle or increase the passion of sexual Love” (Feb. 1803; CN 1, 1356). “Eye-given pleasure-yearnings”—wonderful words that recall his own moist and protruding eyes—stir physical interest and at the same time emotional understanding.

In several rarely noticed poems from this period Coleridge observed women performing their roles in society. These poems investigate how women hide their characters in obedience to the requirements of deportment and subdue vitality to meet the expectations of other women, those “elderly young women that discuss the love-affairs of their friends and acquaintance at the village tea-tables” (Friend 1, 49), and of men assessing them as commodities. In an age of mass produced people, of course, women were not alone in following the demands of fashion to look and act alike. Men also adhered slavishly to “the Religion of the Gentleman . . ., the all-implying word of Honor—a thing more blasting to real Virtue, real utility, real standing forth for the Truth in Christ, than all the whoredomes & Impurities which this Gentlemanliness does most generally bring with it” (CL 1, 323), conformists whom he will late despise as “Fetich worshippers,” who measure value in terms of things. But while men shaped themselves as “gentlemen” for numerous reasons, women conformed in order to be marriageable, in a market that Mary Poovey has chillingly enumerated as an economy of male scarcity, a market that denatured women’s humanity by imposing an enfeebling “modesty,” and rendered them almost invisible. As Sonia Hofkosh perceives in regard to Mary Shelley’s story “The Invisible Girl,” a girl reading amidst luxurious furnishings is seen as “always already materialized—but only as a fetish of herself, an image, a picture, or a ‘living shadow.’” Hofkosh’s words might be read backward into Coleridge’s positioning of inscrutable women amid their belongings, hiding their bodies, their voices, and their distinctive thoughts.

“On the Christening of a Friend’s Child” (1797) prays for the safe delivery of Coleridge’s Nether Stowey neighbor, Anna Cruikshanks, whose husband John was briefly Lord Egmont’s agent before he went bankrupt. She was one of “a number of very pretty young women in Stowey, all musical—,” as Coleridge wrote John Thelwall, adding “I am an immense favorite; for I pun, conundrumize, listen & dance. The last is a recent acquirement” (Feb. 6, 1797; CL 1, 308). Coleridge’s sympathy for Anna during her difficult pregnancy leads him to pray,—“May the