

## Correspondence

### *On the Development of Wordsworth's 'Michael'*

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DR WOOF'S and Mr Wordsworth's remarks on *Michael* and the ballad stanzas written by Wordsworth in 1800 in association with *Michael* are nothing if not stimulating; and with these and Professor Parrish's important discussion and edition of the ballad verses already before us, further comment may offer an unexciting prospect.<sup>1</sup> Since the fundamental issue, however, is the development of a major poem, and since certain considerations needed in balanced judgement have been neglected, a few additional remarks are perhaps appropriate.

No very brief summary can do justice to Dr Woof's and Mr Wordsworth's arguments, but some review of these is an almost necessary preliminary. It is probably fair to say, then, that main purposes of Dr Woof's first article as far as *Michael* is concerned were to establish the following points: that the course of the poem's development was most likely from rhyme into blank verse; that some lines of the rhymed version survive in draft in the Dove Cottage Christabel Notebook; that John Stoddart came to know *Michael* in rhymed form during his visits to Wordsworth in Grasmere October–November 1800, then later spoke of the rhymed poem to John Wordsworth; that the poet probably burned much of the original rhymed poem on 9 November 1800; that since Dorothy Wordsworth's Journal does not refer to 'the sheepfold' in apparent allusion to a poem after 11 November 1800, although such references are common in preceding weeks, 'The Sheepfold' was probably the title of the rhymed poem. The

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Woof, 'John Stoddart, Michael, and Lyrical Ballads', *Ariel*, 1, April 1970, pp. 7–22; Jonathan Wordsworth, 'A Note on the Ballad Version of Michael', *Ariel*, 11, April 1971, pp. 66–71; Stephen M. Parrish, 'Michael and the Pastoral Ballad', *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, Ithaca, N.Y., 1970, pp. 50–75.

basic evidence apart from Dorothy's Journal appears to be (a) the fact of surviving rhymed draft undoubtedly related to *Michael*, and (b) John Wordsworth's remark of perhaps 29 January 1801 in reaction to reading *Michael* (quoted by Jonathan Wordsworth, *Ariel*, April 1961, p. 67):

When I first read [*Michael*] I though [t] the circumstances too minute & the language too low for a blank verse poems [*sic*] — from what Stoddart had told me I thought it would have been a poem in rhyme . . .

The burning of a poem called 'The Sheepfold' remains somewhat uncertain even to Dr Woof, who reads the crucial verb in Dorothy's Journal as '[burnt?]'. What is clear is that John Wordsworth had the idea that *Michael* was in rhyme from Stoddart. It is reasonable to suppose that Stoddart's thoughts on the subject were formed when visiting Wordsworth during a period in which the poet was certainly working on a poem dealing with a sheepfold.

Mr Wordsworth's reply suggests that Dr Woof's description of Wordsworth's shift from rhyme to blank verse is unconvincing and that much of the surviving rhymed draft is jocular and in part associated with another poem, *A Character*. He further suggests that the jocular rhymed draft perhaps represents work on a prologue, and that the serious draft represents corrective draft for a central portion of a poem already in existence (he notes that a curious humour in connection with serious subjects is hardly rare in Wordsworth's poetry, *Peter Bell* being a primary case in point). Mr Wordsworth believes that 'Stoddart did not apparently say that Wordsworth was writing *Michael* in rhyme; he said something that led John to infer it'. But he feels also (pp. 67-8) that ambiguities remain:

It is not . . . clear whether John is reinforcing his previous statement ('When I first read the poem I thought the content and language too low for blank verse — in fact from what Stoddart told me of these things I'd inferred the poem would be in rhyme . . .'), or saying that as well as feeling as he read that the matter was too low for blank verse, he had had information of a different kind that led him to expect a rhymed poem. Dr. Woof takes the second interpretation for granted.

Mr Wordsworth does not speculate about what sort of information that was neither about the rhyme itself nor about content and language led John to his conclusion that the poem was in rhyme.

Dr Woof argues in reply that Mr Wordsworth's difficulties in interpreting John's comment are unnecessary: it can be demonstrated that John's 'original objection was to the inclusion in *Michael* of "very circumstantial details of everyday life, such as colloquial speech"', not over-all subject matter, as material for blank verse. Mr Wordsworth's suggestion of the possibility of a close association between *A Character* and the rhymed draft connected with *Michael* is then examined particularly. Professor Griggs had earlier suggested, in *Review of English Studies*, iv, 1953, pp. 57-63, that *A Character* was basically a poem about Coleridge, and in *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967, pp. 323-4, I had myself reiterated that argument and quoted lines from the rhymed draft connected with *Michael* as being possibly draft for *A Character*; and Mr Wordsworth has in turn alluded to my remarks as reinforcement for his position. Dr Woof accurately demonstrates that the draft lines which I quoted as 'toward [*A Character*] or a similar poem' are probably a portion of the rhymed drafts connected with *Michael*. *A Character*, Dr Woof further argues, is not a poem about Coleridge but is, as Wordsworth himself stated in the late Fenwick note to the poem, about the poet's friend Robert Jones. Jones visited Wordsworth in September 1800. The descriptions of *A Character* fit Jones and do not fit Coleridge. The fact that Coleridge found certain parts and superficialities of himself sketched truly in the poem should be unsurprising, as 'the introverted man finds reflections of himself everywhere'. The basis of the connection of Coleridge with *A Character* and the rhymed draft associated with *Michael* 'is little more than subjective assertion'.

What matters among these problems is of course the nature of the development of *Michael*. But the difficulties posed by *A Character* must now be worked through on the way to the main subject. First, accordingly, I will say that the lines which I quoted as draft 'toward [*A Character*] or a similar poem' do seem to me most probably written about the time of the rest of the jocular draft in the rhymed stanzas associated with *Michael*, and probably are connected with that work. But that the basis of a connection between *A Character*, the rhymed draft, and Coleridge is 'little more than subjective assertion' is a charge with implications

obviously extending beyond the immediate questions at hand. When the argument has elicited such terms as these serious students will recognize that the time has arrived for them to make an independent examination of the evidence and arrive at their own conclusions.

To begin with one of the three sides of the triangle of relationships between the poems and Coleridge, such students would, I suppose, with regard to the possibility of connection between Coleridge and *A Character*, in fairness wish to read the arguments first advanced by Professor Griggs. I would hope that they might also wish to take a few other considerations into account:

(1) As Dr Woof remarks in a footnote, I have in my *Chronology* noticed that at least portions of *A Character* were probably written before the arrival of Robert Jones at Grasmere. The time of writing was in fact at least two months before Jones came. The parts of *A Character* which had been written then probably included the first, second, and fourth stanzas: or to speak more objectively, initial letters of these stanzas may be found on the stub of a leaf among a group of stubs in the Christabel Notebook containing indications of other work probably dating before late July 1800 (see *Chronology*, 323-4). The earliest surviving full MS. of the lines so indicated, which also appears in the Christabel Notebook, includes the two stanzas of which Dr Woof quotes the published version to illustrate his argument that the poem is about Robert Jones. These are the first two of the three stanzas concerned which follow:

I marvel how nature could ever find space  
 For [all the expression *corrected without cancellation to*]  
 the things and the nothings you see in his face  
 There's thought and no thought and there's paleness & bloom  
 And bustle and indolence pleasure & gloom

There's weakness and strength both redundant & vain  
 Such strength as if ever affliction & pain  
 Could pierse through his temper as soft as a fleece  
 Would surely be fortitude, Sister of peace

There's indifference alike when he fails or succeeds  
 And attention full time as much as there needs  
 Pride where there's no envy there's so much of joy  
 And mildness: and spirit both forward & coy[.]

Description of Coleridge's appearance and character as it appeared to Wordsworth and discussion of the pertinence of Wordsworth's opinions on these subjects to these stanzas can hardly be presented here in breadth sufficient for the serious student; and the subject is old and familiar. The same is true of Coleridge's comments on his qualities as they appeared to himself, such as that of 4 January 1799:

The work I have planned — & I have imperiously excluded all waverings about other works — ! That is the disease of my mind — it is comprehensive in it's conceptions & wastes itself in the contemplations of the many things which it might do! (*Letters*, I, 454-5)

or that of 7 October 1800:

If I know my own heart, or rather if I be not profoundly ignorant of it, I have not a spark of *ambition* / and tho' my *vanity* is flattered, more than it ought to be, by what Dr Johnson calls 'colloquial prowess', yet it leaves me in my study. (*Letters*, I, 628-9)

The second statement was, after all, perhaps made after *A Character* was finished, and Coleridge's remark that the poem sketched certain parts and superficialities of himself was certainly so. The student may nonetheless wish to decide on the basis of his own wider reading and the inherent character of the chronological evidence whether the stanzas just quoted, probably written before late July 1800, are more likely to have been written in anticipation of a visit two months later from a person whom Wordsworth is not known to have seen in seven years, and whose visit is not known to have been expected then, or are more likely to describe a person with whom Wordsworth was in frequent contact (such as Coleridge, with whom Wordsworth had spent about a month and a half between 4 May and mid-July), or are more likely to describe neither sort of person, or are more likely to present some sort of imaginative combination of persons, possibly including someone whom Wordsworth saw fairly frequently. Should the student decide that either the second or fourth of these alternatives possesses any likelihood, he will then wish, perhaps, to decide what friend Wordsworth may have had in mind.

(2) If the student should, after all, decide that *A Character* has some connection with Coleridge, then the establishment of the connection or lack of connection between Coleridge and the work

which Dr Woof calls 'The Sheepfold', and of the poems with each other, become the next tasks. The first problem may be divided, seemingly, into two parts. One may possibly first wish to decide whether Coleridge, with whom Wordsworth had by 15 October spent two and one-half months since 4 May, and with whom the older poet had in recent weeks been working out the contents of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* and discussing *Christabel*, can be one of the persons in Wordsworth's mind, as Jonathan Wordsworth has suggested, when he writes:

Two shepherds we have they're the wits of the dale  
Renown'd for song satire epistle & tale[.]<sup>1</sup>

If one's decision is affirmative he will probably next have to decide whether Coleridge could contribute to the description:

Deep read in experience perhaps he is nice  
On himself is so fond of bestowing advice  
And of puzzling through what may befall  
so intent upon making his bread without leaven  
And of giving to earth the perfection of heaven  
That he thinks and does nothing at all[.]

Here, as before, the student has no choice but to decide on the basis of what he can discover in standard sources concerning Coleridge's character and Wordsworth's opinion of it — especially respecting Coleridge's co-ordination of his philosophic speculation and action — whether the lines might possibly refer to Coleridge. He may also wish to consider whether they might apply to Robert Jones, about whose speculative pursuits most Wordsworthian scholars would probably be glad to learn more.

(3) If by any chance the student should feel it possible that both *A Character* and the rhymed draft just discussed have some reference to Coleridge, he will be obliged for the sake of completeness to consider also, with regard to the relation of the poems to each other, Dr Woof's argument that the stanza of ballad draft related to *Michael* and the stanza of *A Character* are 'not at all identical', a fact that I have 'surprisingly found no bar to a pursuit of a connection between the two poems'. One's obligation here, that is, would appear to be a decision regarding the significance of the difference in stanza pattern. The stanza of

<sup>1</sup> Here and below I quote the base readings of Professor Parrish's edition.

*A Character* is a quatrain of two anapestic tetrameter couplets, with an amphibrach frequently substituted for the first foot (the stanza of *The Farmer of Tilsbury Vale*, *The Reverie of Poor Susan*, and *The Childless Father*, among poems of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*). The stanza of the ballad draft is six lines, of two anapestic tetrameter couplets, each followed by an anapestic trimeter line, the trimeter lines rhyming, with an amphibrach frequently substituted for the first foot (the stanza, as Professor Parrish points out, of *Rural Architecture*, among poems of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*). In other words, the second type of stanza is a tail-rhyming version of the first. To rephrase the question: If the stanzas are 'not at all identical', are they also not at all enough alike to allow pursuit of a connection between the poems?

Enough has now been said to justify turning more directly to the problem of the relationship between the ballad draft and the development of the poem *Michael* itself. The assumption of allusion to Coleridge in the ballad draft does not of course bar argument that the poem to which this draft belonged *was* at some point what may properly be termed *Michael*; neither does the presence of good-humoured lines in the draft. I will, however, without claiming objectivity, proffer the opinion that not simply some but most of the draft lines — about five stanzas out of six — are either humorous, good-humoured, or, indeed, silly. The content of the lines does imply, as Jonathan Wordsworth remarks, that the poet had already at least conceived some story about Michael not altogether different from the finished poem, involving a shepherd of that name and a sheepfold. Mr Wordsworth, as already indicated, explains these lines as a prologue, in a vein of jocularly not unlike that of *Peter Bell*, for a completed poem; and he separates the concluding draft, apparently entirely serious, from the rest, stating that this 'must surely be explained as reworking of lines from a complete, or largely complete, poem, broadly corresponding to *Michael* as we know it'. The serious lines would, however, appear equally possibly a casual draft for work not yet complete or even very extended, and nothing about their appearance readily indicates that they are not the first or only draft of the lines in question. Nor, further, does there appear any firm reason for supposing that the more jocular lines

constitute anything but a momentary indulgence, no more intended for publication than, say, Wordsworth's and Sara Hutchinson's to them very merry collaboration 'Queen and Negress Chaste and Fair' (see *Letters of the Later Years*, I, 53-5). Some of these lines are so incoherent both internally and with context as to seem devoid of any intention but nonsensicality, as:

But all their suggestion & taunts to repeat  
And all that sly malice so bitter & Sweet  
My pen it would sadly distress;  
When I say that our maidens are larks in their glee  
And fair as the moon hanging over the sea  
The drift of these rhymes you will guess[.]

While no definite conclusion can be reached from such limited evidence in any case, this drafting appears to represent wit of an order vague and undirected in comparison with that of the Prologue of *Peter Bell*. And while the jocular lines certainly imply the prior existence in Wordsworth's mind of a story about Michael, neither they nor the apparently serious lines seem to me to offer very revealing evidence about the quantity or verse pattern of whatever then existed of a serious poem about Michael.

The central question becomes, in these circumstances, that of the interpretation placed upon John Wordsworth's report concerning Stoddart's remarks. There is, of course, no doubt that John had expectations about the poem derived from Stoddart. His responses are important to the question of the possibility of a rhymed poem corresponding to *Michael*, however, only insofar as they reveal or do not reveal what Stoddart had told him that led him to expect rhyme — whether or not that had to do with basic subject matter, specific circumstances and type of language, or with something else. Mr Wordsworth, as already remarked, leans to the view that John 'as well as feeling as he read that the matter was too low for blank verse . . . had information of a different kind that led him to expect a rhymed poem', although he feels also that this information was not directly about the subject of rhyme. Dr Woof does not examine the question of whether John's expectations about the rhyme were inferential or based on Stoddart's direct statements but apparently assumes (see p. 12) that Stoddart described a poem in rhyme to John. If John's expectations were inferential, however, there can be no



firm case for Stoddart's having known a rhymed poem like *Michael*. If they were based on direct statement, the extent and accuracy of Stoddart's knowledge becomes an important concern. Final judgement might well take into account these considerations:

(1) As far as available information goes, it is much more certain that John had decided views about the propriety of blank verse for particular sorts of poetry than that Stoddart himself did. Stoddart's review of *Lyrical Ballads* (*British Critic*, xvii, 1801, 125-31) makes no reference to matters of decorum involving the blank verse and rhyme. John's views were ready upon reading. What Stoddart might have said to produce John's inferences it is fruitless to speculate, but that John might have drawn inferences is plain. But it is not plain that Stoddart made any remarks about the poem's versification. Hence it is not plain that Stoddart knew a rhymed poem.

(2) John's letters show him a less than perfect grammarian, but his conditional subjunctive 'I thought it would have been a poem in rhyme' indicates a degree of inference inappropriate had Stoddart told him directly that *Michael* was in rhyme. In that case John's predictable phrasing would be simply, 'I thought it was a poem in rhyme'. John may be indicating, however, that he had had some little doubt about a direct report from Stoddart, but had, as it were, gone ahead and inferred that the poem was in rhyme, since Stoddart said so. Here, then, the question of the dimensions and precision of Stoddart's knowledge becomes of consequence.

(3) A later statement by John bearing on this last problem written about but by 9 April 1801, has for some reason not been quoted in previous arguments about Stoddart and *Michael*, although it seems to me relevant:

I did not at first like the poem so much as I expected indeed I was *disappointed* when I first read it having heard much of it from Stoddart who at the same time knew no more about it except to praise it than a goose — I rather think he praised it because he had heard Colridge speak highly of it[.] (*Letters*, 115-16)

My own conclusion: It would be perverse to maintain that Stoddart could not have known something of *Michael* as a result

of his visits at Grasmere, or to insist that no rhymed version of *Michael* can ever have existed. To argue on the other side for a moment, the proposition might be advanced that it was perhaps *because* Stoddart, who, after all, possessed a 'very wicked memory' (see Dr Woof's first article, p. 11), knew a rhymed poem and talked only of it that John, after seeing the blank verse poem, became convinced that Stoddart knew nothing about *Michael*. One might go further and speculate that the jocular verses date specifically from 22 October 1800, a day when according to Dorothy's Journal, Wordsworth worked unsuccessfully 'at the sheepfold', when Coleridge and Stoddart were at Dove Cottage, and when, after dinner, the party was 'very merry'. One can at last, that is, only guess how fairly John was judging Stoddart's knowledge. But in absence of any indication that John was neglecting signs that Stoddart knew the poem well, John's statement that Stoddart knew no more about *Michael* than a goose is considerably less ambiguous than the remarks which might be interpreted as indicating that John learned from direct statements that the poem was in rhyme or even as indicating that Stoddart knew much of what he was taking about when discussing the poem. If Stoddart did indeed know some rhymed verses, they may have been only the jocular lines; and no clear evidence exists that he knew any rhymed verses at all. Only one stanza of serious rhymed work is known; the time of its composition is uncertain; and if Wordsworth did burn drafts related to *Michael*, what they consisted of is at this time matter for only the most tentative speculation. Present evidence does not confirm extensive work on a rhymed poem corresponding to *Michael* as more than a possibility in logic.