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Madeleine Callaghan

Writing "Supreme Reality": Coleridge's *Religious Musings* and Shelley's *Queen Mab*

"Tell me of the political state of England" wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, "— its literature, of which when I speak Coleridge is in my thoughts."[1] The terms of Coleridge's importance for Shelley are implicit. As was natural to Shelley, politics passes into literature, and Coleridge represents a bridge, of sorts, between the two. How to reconcile or unite these branches of thought, and many others, preoccupied Shelley throughout his career, and Coleridge was the older peer in whom Shelley found a poet engaged in the same struggle. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley discusses the divided role of the poet, noting that poets inhabit the role of legislator and prophet, called upon to be an integral part of society even as they should "participate[s] in the eternal, the infinite and the one."[2] The poet must manage the claims of the temporal and the eternal. Coleridge shares Shelley's fascination with the role of the poet, with his "typically syncretic" and "profoundly ambitious" imagination frequently testing the boundaries of poetic possibility.[3] Timothy Webb shrewdly notes that some of Shelley's early poetry sees the younger poet considering

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[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 1:490. Hereafter *Letters: PBS*, with volume and page number supplied.

[2] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 677. Shelley's poetry and prose (except *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*), unless otherwise specified, will be quoted from this edition. Hereafter *Major Works*.

[3] Morton D. Paley, "Apocalypse and Millennium in the Poetry of Coleridge," *The Wordsworth Circle* 23, no. 1 (1992): 24.

Coleridge more as political thinker than artist."[4] For Shelley found in Coleridge a fellow poet, more a peer than an authority figure,[5] who sought to couple political fervor with poetic imagination. Prophetic visionary poetry, imbued with political and philosophical thought, becomes the ultimate link between the two poets. This article will consider *Religious Musings* and *Queen Mab* to demonstrate the wide-ranging and, above all, shared preoccupations of Coleridge and Shelley's work.

Though Carlos Baker would call *Queen Mab* "an unsuccessful emulsion" of various principles,[6] its Coleridgean aspects suggest that the poem is successful on its own terms where "emulsion" is its strength rather than its weakness. This effort to unite seemingly diverse spheres of life brings Shelley near to what we might view as Coleridgean visionary style. *Religious Musings*' refusal to separate the political from the ethical, the poetic from the philosophical or the religious, is shared by Shelley's *Queen Mab*. Coleridge's poem became a key model for Shelley's experimental epic. The influence of Coleridge upon Shelley has attracted criticism that reveals important parallels between the two poets. Sally West's excellent study shows the way in which Shelley "adapts and recontextualizes" features of Coleridge's poetry,[7] and though she does not draw many parallels between Shelley's poetry and *Religious Musings*,[8] her study reveals the depth and complexity of Shelley's engagement with Coleridge. Jerrold E. Hogle's *Shelley's Process* notes Shelley's fascination with Coleridge's

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[4] Timothy Webb, "Coleridge and Shelley's *Alastor*: A Reply," *Review of English Studies* 18, no. 72 (1967): 410.

[5] Sally West, *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual Engagement* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

[6] Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948), 29.

[7] West, *Coleridge and Shelley*, 3.

[8] West draws a parallel between *Religious Musings* and Shelley's "The Vision of the Sea" and makes a brief mention of *Religious Musings*' possible presence in *Prometheus Unbound*. See West, *Coleridge and Shelley*, 148–49 and 170.

philosophical bent and how, at the same time, the younger poet seeks to distance himself from his older peer. Hogle's view that Shelley rejects how Coleridge and Wordsworth are too drawn "toward subordination to the Christian Father" is apt, but again, *Religious Musings*' significance for Shelley is not explored.[9] Michael O'Neill draws out the "remarkably intricate intertextual conversation" between Coleridge and Shelley,[10] and Matthew Scott draws a parallel between the poets when he shows how both consider poetry as the means to transfigure the commonplace.[11] But it is in their adoption of the role of poet-prophets that will form the focus of this article.

Michael Scrivener places Shelley "in a line of visionary radicals,"[12] and Shelley's brand of visionary poetry forges significant parallels to Coleridge's early prophetic writing. Shelley finds in Coleridge an ally, though one already vanquished in the eyes of the young radical, who made prophecy a key mode of his own work. Focusing upon *Religious Musings* and *Queen Mab*, this article will consider the way in which Coleridge's poem influenced not only the points of similarity but also the significant differences between the two poems. Steven E. Jones notes of "The Devil's Walk: A Ballad" that its "'derivativeness' is precisely the point" because Shelley views himself as formed out of the best of his older peers.[13] *Queen Mab* sees Shelley slip the yoke of imitation and aim for individuation through conscious influence. In *Queen Mab*,

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[9] Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40.
[10] Michael O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence: New Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 116.
[11] Matthew Scott, "'A manner beyond courtesy': Two Concepts of Wonder in Coleridge and Shelley," *Romanticism* 18, no. 3 (2012): 235.
[12] Michael Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 13.
[13] Steven E. Jones, *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), 41–42.

Shelley creates his version of “prophetic efficacy” by learning from and then individuating Coleridge’s *Religious Musings*.[14]

Shelley’s sense of Coleridge’s significance speaks highly of his critical acumen: Shelley remains aloof from the official judgments of his closest poetic allies,[15] and choosing Coleridge displays a disinterestedness, given that he never met the older poet. For Shelley and Coleridge never so much as corresponded. Michael O’Neill conjures “a bewitching scenario” where Coleridge and Shelley meet,[16] yet O’Neill’s eloquent discussion of the two poets suggests, *sotto voce*, that the most important form of meeting, the intellectual union, reveals itself in Shelley’s response to Coleridge. Thomas Love Peacock also notes Coleridge’s strong influence on Shelley’s imagination.[17] Coleridge functions neither as a forbidding ancestor nor as a kindly father figure,[18] neither a terrible warning nor an untouchably perfect example.[19] What lingers most seductively is Coleridge’s early prophetic poetry. Coleridge’s swift and syncretic imagination would captivate Shelley, especially how the older poet incorporated a variety of intellectual interests into *Religious Musings*.

[14] I borrow this phrase from L. E. Marshall, “‘Words Are Things’: Byron and the Prophetic Efficacy of Language,” *Studies in English Literature* 25, no. 4 (1985): 801–22.
[15] Byron, for example, had attacked, amongst many others, Coleridge in his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, though he had also donated £100 to a literary fund for Coleridge, and presided over the Drury Lane Committee that accepted Coleridge’s play, *Remorse*.
[16] O’Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings*, 111.
[17] Thomas Love Peacock, *Peacock’s Memoirs of Shelley*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), 37.
[18] For each version of influence theory, see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[19] For a negative view of Coleridge’s example for Shelley, see Joseph Raben, “Coleridge as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *Review of English Studies*, 17, no. 67 (1966): 292.

Queen Mab attempts a Shelleyan version of such syncretic poetry, with Coleridge's influence sponsoring Shelley's diversity of thought coupled with visionary prophecy.

Relatively little critical consideration has been given to how Shelley's prophetic mode owes much to *Religious Musing*'s grand visionary sweep. In part, this owes to Shelley's decision not to quote from Coleridge's poem verbatim, or adopt the same attitudes or persona. But Coleridge's self-appointed role as *vates* in *Religious Musings* offers Shelley an example of how to create vatic poetry of his own. Coleridge's ambition, the terms of his development, and his youth are writ large in *Religious Musings*. David Collings astutely notes its importance throughout Coleridge's career, viewing *Religious Musings* as the site where we see the poet "developing specific terms which will loom large in later works, from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to the *Biographia* and beyond, but more importantly formulating the general terms of his authorship."[20] Though Coleridge would later remake himself as less prophet or visionary than philosopher and thinker, Shelley would remain true to his visionary instinct throughout his career, viewing prophecy as a vital mode for using poetry as a means of intervention into debates from politics, philosophy, ethics, science, and beyond. But Shelley does not make tracing the contours of influence simple or straightforward. He would not reveal Coleridge or *Religious Musings*'s influence via a well-placed echo or allusion: Shelley does not lean on Coleridge to provide words to repeat, nor is Coleridge's doctrinal position one that the younger poet would adopt. Rather, Shelley sees himself engaged in the same struggle as the Coleridge of *Religious Musings*, a poet who, like Shelley himself, would fashion his role as

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[20] David Collings, "Coleridge Beginning a Career: Desultory Authorship in *Religious Musings*," *ELH* 58, no. 1 (1991): 188.

"Bardic celebrant, a seer of visions, a roving ambassador of Sensibility,"[21] and Shelley cast himself as an artist capable of sharing *Religious Musings*' "encyclopedic reach of concern."[22] *Queen Mab* sees Shelley install Coleridge in poet-prophet guise as a peer who could offer possibilities for the young artist but not a blueprint: *Religious Musings* is the touchstone to which Shelley would return.

In later life, Coleridge rued their failure to meet when Shelley visited Keswick in 1811 with the aim of meeting Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. Shelley managed to meet Southey in December 1811, which was no small pleasure to a young poet who was greatly taken by Southey's work and named *The Curse of Kehama* his favorite poem in the same year.[23] Coleridge saw it otherwise: "He went to Keswick on purpose to see me and unfortunately fell in with Southey instead," but his belief that he could have molded Shelley by such techniques as "I should have laughed at his Atheism" seems misguidedly optimistic about how Shelley might have responded to such an approach.[24] But no meeting meant no disagreement: Coleridge's impression upon Shelley would be literary rather than personal, imagined rather than actual, and all the more potent for it. Anthony John Harding writes, "[t]he constant feature in Coleridge's mentorships, and the one that drew all these other strands together, was his wish to help young men awaken their own reasoning powers through a form of mental reflection and discipline,"[25] and Coleridge could manage this without speaking to Shelley directly. Mentorship could be imaginative and mediated through public

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[21] Paley, "Apocalypse and Millennium in the Poetry of Coleridge," 25.
[22] Collings, "Coleridge Beginning a Career," 169.
[23] See *Letters: PBS* 1, 101.
[24] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 14 in two parts, ed. Carl Woodring, Bollingen Series LXXV (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 1:574.
[25] Anthony John Harding, "Coleridge as Mentor and the Origins of Masculinist Modernity," *European Romantic Review* 14, no. 4 (2003): 457.

writing alone. By the time of his death, Shelley owned all of Coleridge's collections of poetry, some plays including *Remorse*, and a number of his prose works.[26] Shelley was an attentive reader ready to forge his response to his peer, and to *Religious Musings* in particular, in poetry of his own.

Ewan James Jones rightly rejects the perspective that for Coleridge "poetry is merely an unceasing interruption of philosophy,"[27] and Shelley adopts the same stance in his poetic response to Coleridge. Philosophy, theology, politics, and history, among many other modes of thought, are closely interwoven in Coleridge's poetry in such a way as to make their separation impossible. Coleridge's ideas rode the crest of a continental intellectual wave. Friedrich Schlegel insists that "[w]here philosophy stops, poetry has to begin," but his even more penetrating question asks: "But what [then] is poetical poetry?"[28]. Like Schlegel and Coleridge, Shelley would also view "poetical poetry" as almost impossible to define, much less write, with poetry always finding its way into other disciplines and vice versa. Coleridge and Shelley share the insight that philosophical meaning is inextricable from its poetic method. Coleridge "increasingly positioned poetry in the philosophical role of representing the 'system of fine arts',"[29] and Shelley would be close upon his heels, imagining for poetry a philosophical significance that he crowns with claiming Plato as "essentially a poet" in *A Defence of Poetry* (*Major Works*, 679). From the time of Coleridge and Shelley's early poetry,

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[26] West, *Coleridge and Shelley*, 1.
[27] Ewan James Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 56.
[28] Friedrich Schlegel, *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. and introd. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1971) (*Ideas*), 245 and *Critical Fragments*, 154.
[29] Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 161.

theology, philosophy, politics, would be bound together in poetry, sometimes in tension, sometimes in harmony with one another. Prophecy functions as the key mode that allowed both poets to speak and find a voice both of and beyond them.

Prophecy was not the most auspicious route to success for the aspiring poet. Orianne Smith underscores the ubiquity of prophecies after 1789,[30] and E. J. Clery summarizes the period's disenchantment with a cast-off fashion: "Prophetic visions are a dime a dozen."[31] Clery also notes that Anna Letitia Barbauld, for example, was abused by the *Anti-Jacobin* as a "*prophet*" rather than a "prophet,"[32] with those mocking italics signaling contempt for what they read as her presumptuousness.[33] Coleridge and Shelley aimed to avoid such censure. Milton's poetry was a model to which both turned to for help, and Shelley took heart from Coleridge's response to Milton. Though in his discussion of the "Unitarian Sublime," Peter J. Kitson argues that the "Miltonic political sublime" was quickly rendered outdated by the failure of the French Revolution,[34] but Milton's example was only one element of the prophetic voice for both poets. Coleridge admired him but would also note "the occasional harshness in the construction" of Milton's writing,[35] breaking away from as much as

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[30] Orianne Smith, *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy: Rebellious Daughters, 1786–1826* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 4.
[31] E. J. Clery, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven: Poetry, Protest and Economic Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 91.
[32] Clery, 86.
[33] Christopher M. Bundock quotes John Wesley's similar remarks against the "vain imagination" of would-be prophets. See John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, 4th vol. (London: J. Kershaw, 1827), 432, quoted in Christopher M. Bundock, *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 3.
[34] See Peter J. Kitson, "'To Milton's Trump': Coleridge's Unitarian Sublime and the Miltonic Apocalypse," in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002), 47.
[35] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. R. A. Foakes, vol. 5 in 2 parts, Bollingen

emulating Milton's poetry. Claiming such freedom as his own, Shelley was radically transformative of Milton's poetic legacy, and as well as approaching Milton's work directly when adopting the prophetic mode, he filtered Milton through Coleridge's example. Like Barbauld, whose "fullest reply to Coleridge's gift of *Poems* is *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*,"[36] Shelley's response to Coleridge would be to write prophetic poetry of his own.

Despite Shelley's responsiveness rather than confrontational approach to Coleridge, discussions of Coleridge and Shelley's relations often err towards a caricature of how, as Michael O'Neill's précis has it, "Shelley the atheist nimbly outwits Coleridge the plagiarizing believer" in the likes of "Mont Blanc" when viewed as a reply to "Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni."[37] Or, there is a narrative of growth where Shelley moves from being a derivative acolyte into demonstrating a mature grasp of allusion.[38] But Shelley's earlier poetry refuses to be complicit in any easy denigration of its powers or its independence. Shelley was young when he wrote *Queen Mab*, but so too was Coleridge when he composed *Religious Musings*. For many critics, including John Axcelson, Coleridge's stated decision to change course from his earlier prophetic mode to a more conversation style was a good one,[39] but Shelley does not seem to have shared this belief entirely. *Religious Musings* and its embrace of the prophetic voice remained a key source of inspiration to the younger poet. Shelley's poetry develops but it does not fundamentally change in emphasis or reject

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Series LXXV (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 2:427. Hereafter *CWSTC* with volume and part number (where relevant) given with page numbers.
[36] Clery, 99.
[37] O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings*, 113.
[38] See West's understanding of Shelley's earlier poetry as "more imitative than transformatory." West, *Coleridge and Shelley*, 15.
[39] John Axcelson, "Timing the Apocalypse: The Career of Religious Musings," *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 4 (2005): 440.

its prophetic roots. Blake would proclaim that "the Human Imagination … is the Divine Vision & Fruition,"[40] and the Coleridge of *Religious Musings* and Shelley share Blake's apprehension of imagination as the ultimate route to vision. However, both poets temper Blake's faith in imagination as divine vision with philosophical, political, scientific, and theological preoccupations that see imagination carefully allied with reason, just as the eternal mingles with the temporal in the poetry.[41] When Peter Cheyne notes that "[f]or Coleridge, historical actualization flows from the human contemplation of 'eternal Verities',"[42] Coleridge's sense of the strong connection between the human and the atemporal is shared with Shelley. The attempt to yoke apparently irreconcilable binaries forms a vital link between Coleridge's *Religious Musings* and Shelley's *Queen Mab*.

Religious Musings was the poem upon which Coleridge would "build all my poetic pretensions,"[43] before he came to reject the nature of its literary achievement. The visionary poem opens dense with philosophical concepts, furnishing Shelley with a recent example of what philosophical poetry could achieve, and the grounds of its possible failure. Shelley would also note its speaker's aspiration to bardic sublimity. *Religious Musings* opens with the poet waking to inspiration:

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[40] William Blake, *Milton: A Poem* II. 32 [35], 19, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, rev. edn. 1982), 130.
[41] Axcelson notes "a productive tension between the sudden, unprecedented work of apocalypse and the temporal experience of human beings," "Timing the Apocalypse," 445.
[42] Peter Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 249.
[43] Letter to John Thelwall, late April 1796; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 1:205.

This is the time, when, most divine to hear,

The voice of Adoration rouses me,

As with a Cherub's trump: and high upborne,

Yea, mingling with the Choir, I seem to view

The vision of the heavenly multitude,

Who hymn'd the song of Peace o'er Bethlehem's fields!

(*Religious Musings*, 1–6)[44]

Rather than the poet forcing himself into the foreground, the poet wakes to hear a voice. Shelley would later make use of this gambit in *The Mask of Anarchy*. Coleridge seems chosen, like Dante before him in *The Divine Comedy*, to experience a reality beyond the mortal realm. But there is a slight stumble to suggest his unreadiness. Coleridge only "seem[s] to view" rather than definitely claim his "vision of the heavenly multitude." Coleridge's uncertainty sees him deliberately hold with tradition: though he cannot claim to see the full beatific vision, what he is able to view remains superb and almost beyond articulation. The visionary, from Dante to Milton, and beyond, had always been riven with doubts, and Coleridge's speaker makes us aware of his privileged access to a reality beyond mortal reality, his sense of entering into a tradition, and his own qualms. The exclamation mark refuses to clinch the lines as being entirely sure of their imaginative footing, and this is a careful nod to the conventions of the visionary tradition into which he would enter. The charge of the lines comes from Coleridge entering into the prophetic tradition even as he retains his individual claim to imaginative and religious power.

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[44] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *CWSTC, Volume 16: Poetical Works; Poems (Reading Text) Part 1*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, Bollingen Series LXXV (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 174. Coleridge's poetry will be quoted with line numbers from this edition.

Equally fascinated by the poet's confrontation of vision, Shelley chose to approach it differently. *Queen Mab* possesses a sense of assurance about the quality and power of the poet's vision. Mark Kipperman rightly observes that Shelley's notes to the poem communicate "the sheer brazenness of their confidence, of their palpable expectation of a new world just here, a world conjured up ideally by new knowledge in physics, astronomy, economics, as well as philosophy, ethics, theology."[45] Such assurance was not imperturbable: Shelley tries to conceal any self-doubt by giving Ianthe rather than the poet, speaking in the first person, the grandest imaginative experience:

> Oh! not the visioned poet in his dreams,
>
> When silvery clouds float through the wildered brain,
>
> When every sight of lovely, wild and grand
>
> Astonishes, enraptures, elevates,
>
> When fancy at a glance combines
>
> The wondrous and the beautiful,—
>
> So bright, so fair, so wild a shape
>
> Hath ever yet beheld,
>
> As that which reined the coursers of the air
>
> And poured the magic of her gaze
>
> Upon the maiden's sleep.

(*Queen Mab* I. 68–78)[46]

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[45] Mark Kipperman, "Coleridge, Shelley, Davy, and Science's Millennium," *Criticism* 40, no. 3 (1998): 409.

[46] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Neil Fraistat, Nora Crook Stuart Curran, Michael J. Neth and Michael O'Neill (3 vols. to date; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 2:167. *Queen Mab* will be quoted with canto and line numbers from this edition. Hereafter *CPPBS* with volume number supplied.

For Coleridge, "the GREAT / INVISIBLE" could "(by symbols only seen) / With a peculiar and surpassing light" (*Religious Musings*, 9–11) be envisioned, but Shelley takes a tone of great experience, awarding his own creation, Ianthe, a dream far beyond what "visioned poets" might access. While those poets, with Shelley perhaps included in their number, envision a sight that "Astonishes, enraptures, elevates," Shelley's Ianthe surpasses all such visions with "So bright, so fair, so wild a shape." The vision is "poured" upon Ianthe, where she is inspired from without rather than from within, foreshadowing Shelley's *Defence* and its avowal: "'Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will" (*Major Works*, 696) and following Plato's *Ion*. But such wildness might be as threatening as freeing. For Ross Greig Woodman, "Ianthe, like Shelley in 1812, is not a poet, but a potential poet; she is unable to impose an imaginative form upon that vast amount of material which Shelley in 1812 was struggling to control."[47] The scale of the struggle testifies to his syncretic ability as Shelley, following Coleridge's expansive example in *Religious Musings*, made *Queen Mab* "a story, a serious textbook, even an anthology of materialist thinking."[48] Choosing not to quote *Religious Musings* directly, nor operate via verbal allusiveness alone, Shelley writes determinedly distinctive poetry. *Queen Mab* bears witness to his attempt to spread his artistic wings rather than find his poetic feet: for Shelley, taking on Coleridge's prophetic mantle did not mean repeating his words.

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[47] Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 81–82.
[48] Marilyn Butler, "Shelley and the Empire in the East," in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 162.

Shelley's emphasis is on the "magic of her gaze" (*Queen Mab* I. 77), and such "magic" figures itself as willfully different from the religious focus of Coleridge's vision. By way of stressing his difference from religious prophetic mode, the younger poet laid claim to the "transgressive potentiality of the realm of the fairy."[49] Shelley accesses a competing source of power, decentering religious revelation in favor of his own brand of atheistic poetry. Both Coleridge and Shelley aim to display their learning in their poetry, writing *Religious Musings* and *Queen Mab* in respective yet comparable ways that meditate upon the philosophical, political, religious, and poetic within the confines of a single work. The erudition of *Religious Musings* sees Coleridge unite learning with feeling, revealing how reason, being divinely derived, leads to vision.[50] Such intellectual power also reveals itself through Coleridge's care to display its historical situatedness. "Explicit references within the body of the poem and footnotes to the text (written primarily in 1796 and 1797)" writes David Collings, "include those to Newton, Akenside, Hartley, Berkeley, Erasmus Darwin, Franklin, Priestley, the Bible (especially Revelation), despots responsible for the wars in Eastern Europe, current parliamentary debate concerning the war with France, neo-Platonic philosophy, and travel literature."[51] *Queen Mab* would be similarly expansive. Writing to Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley wrote: "Southey says Expediency ought to [be] made the ground of politics but not of morals. I urged that the most fatal error that ever happened in the world was the separation of political and ethical science, that the former ought to be entirely regulated by the latter" (*Letters: PBS* 1,

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[49] Stuart Curran, "Women Readers, Women Writers," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 188n. Quoted in *CPPBS* 2:494.
[50] Peter Cheyne rightly lists the principle that "[u]nlike sense, understanding, and imagination, reason, in its eminent sense, is not a human faculty" as one of Coleridge's key precepts. See Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 13.
[51] Collings, "Coleridge Beginning a Career," 170–71.

223). *Queen Mab* makes poetic capital out of a rejection of any such separation, choosing instead, like Coleridge in *Religious Musings*, to pack the poetry, even to the point of discomfort, with a tremendous range of ideas. Coleridge's *Religious Musings* represented one way of balancing huge and competing concepts, and Shelley would learn from that example and reveal his poetic singularity through his differences from Coleridge.

The way in which *Religious Musings* is different from *Queen Mab* in terms of the representation of Jesus Christ offers a salutary sense of how Shelley would depart from Coleridge. Christ was a figure with which Coleridge and Shelley could comfortably expect their audiences to be familiar. Connecting myth and religion with politics allowed the temporal to mingle with the eternal, suggesting Shelley and Coleridge's shared aim of encompassing the real and the abstract. Coleridge's characterization of Christ offered Shelley some important poetic opportunities:

> Yet thou more glorious, than all the Angel Host,
> That harbinger'd thy birth, Thou, Man of Woes!
> Despised Galilæan! For the GREAT
> INVISIBLE (by symbols only seen)
> With a peculiar and surpassing light
> Shines from the visage of th' oppress'd good Man,
> What time his Spirit with a brother's love
> Mourns for th' Oppressor.

(*Religious Musings*, 7–14)

Lingering upon the suffering of a human as much as a divine Christ, Coleridge focuses upon Christ's torment as an outsider. Seeing, then decoding, the symbols of

this invisible world, Coleridge anoints himself as visionary poet, one who might attempt if not produce a depiction of eternity, here recalling and recalibrating Dante's emphasis on heavenly light in *Paradiso*. Coleridge's phrasing suggests his Neoplatonic influences and interest in the esoteric, and he employs and deciphers universal symbols. Later, Coleridge would characterize himself as a seeker, dwelling in obscurity even as he awaits this "dim Awaking" of a "hidden Truth,"[52] and this describes the behavior of the speaker of *Religious Musings* who experiences revelation flashing upon his sight. Christ becomes the avatar of "th' oppress'd good man" and Coleridge writes to understand, to gain purchase upon, and even explain the power of Christ to his reader, anticipating his later treatment of the Bible as literature in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*.[53] Coleridge led the way for Shelley to follow, offering independence as the poet's right: Shelley could read the symbols for himself and find his own view of "Man of Woes."

Shelley took up the challenge. Shelley's description of the Son of God centers on his suffering, not simply expiating the sins of humanity, but as the suffering Son of a terrifying Father. Stuart Sperry sees Shelley as experimenting with the relationship between "an unappeasable father using his full power to force compliance with his authority and an isolated, suffering, but defiant offspring clinging to his integrity and

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[52] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Volume 2 1804–1808: Text*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 2:2546.
[53] For an excellent discussion of this, see E. S. Shaffer, "Ideologies in Readings of the Late Coleridge: *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*," *Romanticism on the Net* 17 (2000): https://doi.org/10.7202/005894ar

the conviction of his eventual triumph."[54] But in *Queen Mab*, there is subjection rather than subversion, and Jehovah, not his Son, is sure of his eventual triumph.

One way remains:

I will beget a son, and he shall bear
The sins of all the world; he shall arise
In an unnoticed corner of the earth,
And there shall die upon a cross, and purge
The universal crime; so that the few
On whom my grace descends, those who are marked
As vessels to the honor of their God,
May credit this strange sacrifice, and save
Their souls alive: millions shall live and die,
Who ne'er shall call upon their Saviour's name,
But, unredeemed, go to the gaping grave,

(*Queen Mab*, VII. 134–45)

Shelley separates the characters of Jesus Christ and "the Son of God and the Saviour of the world," seeing Jesus as "a man, who, for a vain attempt to reform the world, paid the forfeit of his life to that overbearing tyranny which has since so long desolated the universe in his name."[55] Though Shelley would charge Jesus with being "an ambitious man,"[56] an accusation that the poet would drop later in his life, he "warmly admires a human Jesus,"[57] seeing him as an "apostle of enlightenment" and

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[54] Stuart Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.
[55] Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Note 15 (VII. 135–36) 36–38, *CPPBS* 2:285.
[56] Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Note 15 (VII. 135–36), *CPPBS* 2:285n.
[57] Nora Crook, "Shelley, Jews and the Land of Promise," in *The Neglected Shelley*, ed. Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 266.

another victim of tyranny.[58] In the quoted passage, even the Son of God earns sympathy as a “strange sacrifice” to an unappeasable tyrant who is happy to consign even the ignorant to “the gaping grave” with no grace extended to them. Shelley exposes a frighteningly close relationship between what Demogorgon terms “the tyranny of heaven” (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3.1. 57) and this world. Terence Allan Hoagwood notes Blake and Shelley’s effort “to strip the veil of illusion—literality and materiality—from the intellectual tenor of art,”[59] and Shelley’s account of God’s plan applies his caustics to reveal how religion and politics entwine. He notes how intellectual freedom to do so is barred at every pass: “Even under a government which, whilst it infringes the very right of thought and speech, boasts of permitting the liberty of the press, a man is pilloried and imprisoned because he is a deist, and no one raises his voice in the indignation of outraged humanity.” Christianity, according to Shelley, suits a tyrannical government, with its structures mirroring the despotism of God. Yoking “priest, conqueror, or prince!” (IV. 237), Shelley leaves us under no illusion about how tyrannies are interconnected and how “generations of the earth / Go to the grave” (V. 1–2). We are a long way from Coleridge. But it was Coleridge’s openness to questioning, his encouragement of independent thought, and his willingness to link the eternal with the temporal, such as the religious with the political, that bolstered Shelley’s atheistic poetry.

[58] Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 57.
[59] Terence Allan Hoagwood. *Prophecy and the Philosophy of Mind: Traditions of Blake and Shelley* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 48.

G. Wilson Knight praises *Religious Musings* as "Coleridge's greatest religious utterance,"[60] and we might extend his praise to witness the poet's careful widening of the religious perspective to include political, social, and philosophical questions. These are the terms of how Shelley used Coleridge's example in *Queen Mab* as he found a peer also conscious of the importance of the inextricable quality of these apparently separate branches of thought. Though representing the vogue of visionary millennialism,[61] for Coleridge, becoming a transhistorical prophet requires the poet to be a contextual politician. Coleridge's speaker might define humanity, specifically the self, as "A sordid solitary thing" (149), but this is held in tension with the calling he avows of prophesying, "the MESSIAH'S destin'd victory!" (158). Coleridge denounces the war with France, focusing upon the hypocrisy of using Christianity as a justification for bloodshed:

> But first offences needs must come! Even now
> (Black Hell laughs horrible—to hear the scoff!)
> THEE to defend, meek Galilaean! THEE
> And thy mild laws of Love unutterable,
> Mistrust and Enmity have burst the bands
> Of social Peace: and list'ning Treachery lurks
> With *pious* fraud to snare a brother's life;
> And childless widows o'er the groaning land
> Wail numberless; and orphans weep for bread!

(*Religious Musings*, 159–67)

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[60] G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (London: Methuen, 1964), 131.
[61] See Tim Fulford, "Apocalyptic and Reactionary?: Coleridge as Hermeneutist," *The Modern Language Review* 87, no. 1 (1992): 19.

Coleridge shakes the meter out of any certain iambic patterns in a manner that mirrors the distortion of Jesus' teachings by warmongers that Coleridge quotes in his note upon the lines,[62] such as the Duke of Portland and Lord Abingdon. Like Shelley, Coleridge pays attention to the betrayal of the "meek Galilaean," who suffers as fraud, under the banner of piety, destroys the people. Turning his attention to such abuses of power, Coleridge's speaker thunders:

> O Fiends of SUPERSTITION! not that oft
> The erring Priest hath stain'd with Brother's blood
> Your grisly idols, not for this may Wrath
> Thunder against you from the Holy One!

(*Religious Musings*, 135–38)

Where Shelley directly connects God with tyranny, Coleridge instead sees such superstition and cruelty as treachery to God. John Axcelson rightly shows that while "*Religious Musings* surely draws on the apocalyptic energies circulating around its revolutionary moment, it is already exploring their integration into temporal experience,"[63] and the mingling of the eternal and the temporal is carefully enacted in these lines. For Coleridge speaks of worldly events profoundly connected to the eternal world while knowing that his words, like Isaiah's, may not be understood. Isaiah reports God as telling him: "Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not" (Isaiah 6:9).[64] Coleridge aims to tell "this people" without any certainty of their understanding the fraught but vital connection between the mortal and divine realms.

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[62] See *CWSTC*, 16. 1:181.
[63] Axcelson, "Timing the Apocalypse," 440.
[64] *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1957). All biblical quotations are from this edition.

Religious Musings rings with condemnation of the means by which humanity has been subjugated by a corrupt and dangerous system. Coleridge begins by denouncing superstition, the same specter against which Shelley would directly take aim in “Superstition.” Shelley proclaims, “Thou taintest all thou lookest upon!” (“Superstition,” 1),[65] while Coleridge details the extent of superstition’s hold upon society. In a note, Coleridge coolly argues that whoever makes avarice and ambition the subject of pursuit has fallen prey to superstition,[66] twisting the word from its usual meaning to focus upon the mercantilism deforming human existence. The poetry is similarly uncompromising about “Fiends of SUPERSTITION!” (*Religious Musings*, 135). Coleridge’s thunderous rhetoric enjoys its dramatic power,[67] as the speaker swiftly figures himself as the instrument of the avenging God for such impiety:

> I will raise up a mourning, O ye Fiends !
>
> And curse your spells, that film the eye of Faith,
>
> Hiding the present God; whose presence lost,
>
> The moral world’s cohesion, we become
>
> An Anarchy of Spirits!

(*Religious Musings*, 142–46)

Promising a reckoning where the speaker curses the blinding spells that occlude faith, Coleridge becomes the poet-prophet whose words might attain the status of deeds. Vision, translated into language, might transform into action. Coleridge’s conviction in *Religious Musings* sees him delineate the means by which humanity has been enslaved, marking how “PROPERTY” (*Religious Musings*, 204), “Disease” (*Religious Musings*, 213), “dagger’d Envy, spirit-quenching Want” (*Religious*

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[65] Quoted from *CPPBS* 3:40.
[66] Coleridge, *CWSTC* 16. 1:180.
[67] As noted by William Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama and the Rhetoric of Agency* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 115.

Musings, 214) come to “vex and desolate our mortal life” (*Religious Musings*, 216). Weeping for the “innumerable multitude of Wrongs / By man on man inflicted” (*Religious Musings*, 306–7), Coleridge awaits the apocalypse, proclaiming that “The hour is nigh” (*Religious Musings*, 308). God will heal all wrongs with Coleridge as His witness, cast as the rejoicing prophet. The righteous anger of the lines insists on the importance of their duty.

Shelley could not access the same kind of Christian certainty, but he could delineate his own moral code in poetry, becoming a new kind of poet-prophet inspired by *Religious Musings* but following his personal ethical roadmap. Shelley exposes not one “erring Priest” (*Religious Musings*, 136), but the system that allows them to crush the “bleeding world” (*Queen Mab*, IV. 210).

> Then grave and hoary-headed hypocrites,
> Without a hope, a passion, or a love,
> Who, through a life of luxury and lies,
> Have crept by flattery to the seats of power,
> Support the system whence their honours flow. . . .
> They have three words:—well tyrants know their use,
> Well pay them for the loan, with usury
> Torn from a bleeding world!—God, Hell, and Heaven:
> A vengeful, pityless, and almighty fiend,
> Whose mercy is a nick-name for the rage
> Of tameless tygers hungering for blood.
> Hell, a red gulf of everlasting fire,
> Where poisonous and undying worms prolong

> Eternal misery to those hapless slaves
>
> Whose life has been a penance for its crimes.
>
> And Heaven, a meed for those who dare belie
>
> Their human nature, quake, believe, and cringe
>
> Before the mockeries of earthly power.

(*Queen Mab*, IV. 203–20).

Shelley's analysis out-satans Milton's Satan in the passage's depths of scorn for the divine hierarchy. Satan could acknowledge "the happy realms of light" from which he had fallen,[68] but Shelley makes no bones about heaven as a prison of sorts for those who "quake, believe, and cringe" to pay their way in paradise. Naming "God, Hell, and Heaven" as the three words that manacle humanity to their suffering, Shelley prefigures his later "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and its emphasis upon "God, and ghosts, and Heaven," (3. 27) as names dreamed up by "sage or priest" (3. 26) as "records of their vain endeavour" (3. 28) to understand the world. Likewise, in *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley opens up "the ghost, the dream, the shade" (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII. X, 83) to scrutiny, inviting the reader to discover the "large codes of fraud and woe" ("Mont Blanc," 81) that imprison humanity. But *Queen Mab* is bolder, if perhaps less nuanced, in denouncing the "grave and hoary-headed hypocrites" that directly oppress their fellow man. Ian Balfour perceptively writes that Shelley "does seem closer to the biblical prophets [than the oracular tradition of ancient Greek literature] primarily for their heterodox spirit,"[69] and Shelley, like Coleridge, speaks with the prophetic voice to reveal political realities. Prophecy, in his hands, would not

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[68] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I. 85, in *John Milton: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998), 123.

[69] Ian Balfour, "Shelley and the Bible," in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe, with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 416.

go in for half measures.

Earth, so dominated by discord for both Coleridge and Shelley, gives way to each poet's imagined version of heaven. Both poets were required to take a new tack. *Religious Musings*, anxiously persuading itself of its own hopes for something beyond human experience, yearns for transcendent eternity beyond the human world:

> Believe thou, O my soul,
> Life is a vision shadowy of Truth;
> And vice, and anguish, and the wormy grave,
> Shapes of a dream! The veiling clouds retire,
> And lo! the Throne of the redeeming God
> Forth flashing unimaginable day
> Wraps in one blaze earth, heaven, and deepest hell.

(*Religious Musings*, 396–402)

Life as a blurred vision of "Truth" is movingly detailed, with Coleridge's choice of vice and anguish as primary sufferings looking backward to that troubled self-portrait of each person as a "sordid solitary thing" (*Religious Musings*, 149). Forcing himself beyond mortal torment, by "Shapes of a dream," Coleridge seems to marvel at his own belief in the dream of life. Pushing himself to imagine that "unimaginable day," Coleridge comforts himself with a sliver of vision, with faith replacing detail at this juncture of the poem. Jon Mee insightfully notes, "Toward the close of 'Religious Musings', Coleridge swerves away from laying claim to the power of prophecy. His province is poetry, dealing with prophetic matter, inspired and sublime to be sure, but

not itself claiming to be prophecy."[70] Yet Coleridge might be questioning the boundary between poetry and prophecy, where we come to doubt how vision can demarcate itself as one thing or the other. The stuff of mortal life pales before that "blaze" of the afterlife, and Coleridge conjures an image of himself "Soaring aloft" as "I breathe th'empyreal air " (415). The ending of the poem has Coleridge alone in heaven, leaving behind the world of politics and time in favor of "omnific, omnipresent LOVE" (416). Coleridge anticipates the possibility of preaching and failing to persuade his listeners, but there is a confidence in his fitness to write prophetic poetry (with the emphasis on poetry) that shines through the lines. This poet can speak of eternity even as he is attuned to time, and even transcend time's power as he imagines "in one blaze earth, heaven, and deepest hell." But to end with how "The glad stream / Flows to the ray and warbles as it flows" (419–20) sees Coleridge bring nature and the natural world into heaven, where even paradise cannot be imagined without time and space. There is a "surprising delicacy" and lightness of touch that reminds the reader that Coleridge remains human and more poet than prophet.[71]

Shelley creates a parallel passage, but does not move into the first person, remaining content to prophesy from within the collective. Where Coleridge's self-persuasion offers an affecting glimpse of the poet willing himself into vision, Shelley creates an enamored hymn to the new world. He conjures a future in which harmony and joy are newly available to humanity as a whole:

> O happy Earth! reality of Heaven!

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[70] Jon Mee, "Anxieties of Enthusiasm: Coleridge, Prophecy, and Popular Politics in the 1790s," *Huntington Library Quarterly* (1997) 60, no. 1 (1997): 196.

[71] Seamus Perry, "Coleridge's Millennial Embarrassments," *Essays in Criticism* 10, no. 1 (2000): 9.

To which those restless souls that ceaselessly

Throng through the human universe, aspire;

Thou consummation of all mortal hope!

Thou glorious prize of blindly-working will!

Whose rays, diffused throughout all space and time,

Verge to one point and blend forever there:

Of purest spirits thou pure dwelling-place!

Where care and sorrow, impotence and crime,

Languor, disease, and ignorance dare not come:

O happy Earth, reality of Heaven!

(*Queen Mab*, IX. 1–11)

Though mocking of how, in relation to God, "Even his worshippers allow that it is impossible to form any idea of him: they exclaim with the French poet, *Pour dire ce qu'il est, il faut être lui-même*," ["To say what he is, you have to be him"][72] Shelley cannot quite articulate what his heaven resembles. To twist Shelley's quotation, to speak of what heaven is, you have to be there and the poet-prophet is not. This joy is bliss not yet achieved by the speaker who aspires to but does not enter into the heaven for which he yearns. Lines nine and ten recall and recalibrate the Book of Revelation's promise: 'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' (21:4). Where Revelation emphasizes the Lord's power and mercy, for Shelley, pain in all its guises "dare not come." Even with the possible advent of heaven, the combative tone does not leave the poetry. Listing what heaven will not contain, Shelley looks forward to *Prometheus Unbound*

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[72] Shelley, *Queen Mab*, Note 13 (VII. 13) 36–38, *CPPBS* 2:268.

and its description of humanity as "Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man: / Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless, / Exempt from awe, worship, degree" (*Prometheus Unbound*, 3.4. 194–6) once freed from Jupiter. The negatives suggest, "there are transcendent realities which cannot be expressed directly but which we must try to approach."[73] Coleridge would embed nature into his heaven, with the speaker as "a thought-bewilder'd man" (*Religious Musings*, 7), acknowledging his humanity even as he imagines heaven. Shelley, defining heaven through what it will not be, admits that heaven is "the end of all desire and will, / The product of all action," (*Queen Mab*, IX. 17–8) but not a place or state achievable during mortal life. These poets, so closely attuned to prophecy, write poetry that knows that "prophecy's greatest potentiality stems from its negativity, fragility, and failure."[74] But the poetry considers it not quite "failure" *per se*, but as the necessary condition of being human, whether Christian or atheist. That each poet has only "dim forebodings of thy loveliness" (*Queen Mab*, IX. 13) is a shared problem: it allows both poets, despite their diverging perspectives, to come together through prophecy's vaunting ambition and its terrifying difficulty.

Shelley's experimentation with prophecy in *Queen Mab* closely connects him to the Coleridge of *Religious Musings*. Shelley enjoys his allusive though one-sided conversation with his older peer, where prophecy is not simply a means to "veil allegorically his heretical ideas and thus circumvent stringent libel laws,"[75] but a

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[73] Timothy Webb, "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*," in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), 57.
[74] Bundock, *Romantic Prophecy*, 7.
[75] Mary A. Quinn, "The Daemon of the World: Shelley's Antidote to the Skepticism of *Alastor*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25, no. 4 (1985): 756.

language that offers a freedom from strict observance of what is so as to enter into an imaginative realm of what might be. This should not suggest a kind of escapism. Prophecy, in Coleridge's hands, became a means of social criticism as well as a divine calling. Shelley relished such doubleness, transforming prophecy into a probing and explorative imaginative mode that he would wield throughout his poetic career,[76] and *Queen Mab* represents an early revelation of the heights of Shelley's ambition. The capaciousness of *Religious Musings*, with its multi-faceted preoccupations that ranged from the religious to the political, and the mythical to the personal, spoke to Shelley's own ambitions as a philosophical poet. *Religious Musings* was a model for Shelley that he would return to, not with reverence, but with a keen sense of his own mastery of Coleridge's twist on the prophetic mode.

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[76] Nora Crook notes Shelley's allusions to *Religious Musings* in *The Historical Tragedy of Charles the First* in *CPPBS* 7: 650 and 655.

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