

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and Orientalism¹

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Introduction

By focusing on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's early interest in Indian religion, and especially in the Indology of Sir William Jones, this article re-evaluates the importance of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century 'Orientalism' in helping us to understand the context of the aesthetic interests that underpin both 'Kubla Khan' as a singular poem and the emergence of the Romantic movement of poetry in Britain more widely. While Edward Said's work has led to a largely negative interpretation of the Orientalist project more generally, this article is interested in building on the work of recent scholars, such as David Vallins, Kaz Oishi, and Seamus Perry in *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient*, by more clearly plotting Coleridge's engagement with contemporary notions of 'the Orient'.² This will demonstrate that the poet's interest in Sir William Jones' Orientalism was in fact far more genuine than has hitherto been acknowledged.

John Coleridge's Letter Home from India

In a remarkable letter from 1774, which has been altogether overlooked by prominent source studies of Coleridge's Orientalism, the poet's older brother, John—serving in the East India Company at that time—wrote home to his brother William about the utility of Sir William Jones' work:

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² David Vallins, Kaz Oishi, Seamus Perry, eds, *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

You desire that I will send you the Persian characters, in answer to which if you want to learn that language you have only to have recourse to Mr. Jones' Persian grammar being much better for your instruction than anything that I can write.³

Although Samuel, the poet-to-be, was very young at the time, this letter implies that there was an interest among Coleridge's immediate family in the cultures and the languages of Asia, and particularly in the work of Jones. It is probable that his brother's correspondence and accounts of his time in India would have formed Coleridge's first imaginative impressions of 'the Orient' and that these letters home would most likely have been the first time that Coleridge would have heard of Jones the Orientalist. Earlier on, in a passage which is very illuminating to the origins of 'Kubla Khan', John tells his brother that,

I left Calcutta about the end of April last, and in a month after arrived here where I have remained ever since. You have no doubt heard of Monghyr famous for its wild romantic situation, and especially for its being the mountpelier of the East. About 2 miles from the garrison there is a Hotwell in which the water continually boils. The Natives esteem it sacred and flock thither from all parts of the Country to receive a holy sprinkling, as they imagine it has the Virtue of cleansing them of their sins.⁴

John's description of "the wild *romantic* situation" and of the "Hotwell in which the water continually boils," being esteemed as "*sacred*" and "*holy*" by the "Natives," is so strikingly resonant of the landscape of 'Kubla Khan'—of the "deep *romantic* chasm," from which "a mighty fountain momentarily was forced," whose source is "the *sacred* river"⁵—that one may wonder whether Coleridge indeed, at the very least, heard this letter being read out and was inspired by his brother's accounts of India. The speaker of Coleridge's poem later goes on to have a vision of a ritual, involving the "Abyssinian maid"—"weave a circle round him thrice, and close your eyes with *holy* dread"—which is equally reminiscent of John's description of the "Natives" "flock[ing] thither from all parts of the Country to receive a *holy* sprinkling." These striking similarities suggest that the

³ James Engell, *Coleridge: The Early Family Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 32.

⁴ Engell, *Coleridge: The Early Family Letters*, p. 32.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 182. Italicisations in quotations included by the author of this article were not in the original text.

poet's image of India was profoundly affected both by John's fascinating accounts of the Ganges, and the religious ceremonies that he saw there, and by a lifelong association of the religions of 'the East' with the Indology and the comparative mythography of Sir William Jones.

The influence of Jones on Coleridge's ideas about 'the Orient' has hitherto been either largely misrepresented, or entirely neglected, by prominent source studies of 'Kubla Khan'. The purpose of this present essay will be to argue that Jones' Orientalism was indeed the single most important source of the poet's intellectual engagement with 'the East', as it was understood, and that an updated examination of Jones' poetry and prose will help us to better elucidate Coleridge's intentions as the author of 'Kubla Khan'.

Sir William Jones' Theory of Religious Origins

In his first and most seminal essay, 'On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India' (1784), published in the original volume of *Asiatic Researches*, Jones carried out a comparative study of ancient theology in which he intended "to point out such a resemblance between the popular worship of the old Greeks and Italians and that of the Hindus" that it would be almost impossible to deny "that some connection has immemorially subsisted between the several nations."⁶ Having added that there can "be [no] room to doubt of a great similarity between their strange religions and that of Egypt, China, Persia, Phrygia, Phoenice, Syria ... America [and] the Gothick system," Jones concluded that "we may infer a general union or affinity [to have existed] between the most distinguished inhabitants of the primitive world."⁷

On a first reading, it seems completely clear that 'Kubla Khan' is the vision of a specific geographical location: the opening lines of the poem imply that the "gardens" which are being described are "in Xanadu."⁸ Yet a closer examination of the poem and its sources reveals that Coleridge envisaged the landscape of 'Kubla Khan' to have various geographical contexts, all of which may be seen to correlate to Jones' comparative study of 'Oriental' religion. The final stanza of 'Kubla Khan', in which the focus of the poem shifts from a description of the potentate's gardens in China to

⁶ William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, Volume 3, ed. Lord Teignmouth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1807), p. 319.

⁷ Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, Volume 3, p. 320.

⁸ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

an account of the speaker's vision of "an *Abyssinian* maid," is perhaps the single most obvious indication that Coleridge intended for the landscape to allude to more than one topographical setting.⁹ J. L. Lowes has demonstrated that the poem clearly references James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*—which perhaps clarifies the geographical origin of "the Abyssinian maid"—as well as William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, and Thomas Maurice's *History of Hindostan*.¹⁰ It is also very probable that Coleridge took the name for "the sacred river,"¹¹ Alph, from the Greek river Alpheus. The implication of this source study is that Coleridge also had in mind the topographies of the Americas, Africa, India, and Greece, in his vision of a Chinese Oriental landscape. When examined in light of these influences, it seems very plausible that 'Kubla Khan' was always intended as a vision of a unified, archetypal landscape which, much like Jones' comparative study of Eastern religions, transcends notional geographical boundaries.

Jones' hypothesis about the "affinity" of primitive culture was based upon his growing belief that

Iran, or Persia in its largest sense, was the true centre of population, of knowledge, of languages, and of arts; which, instead of travelling westward only, as it has been fancifully supposed, or eastward, as might with equal reason have been asserted, were expanded in all directions to all regions of the world, in which the *Hindu race* had settled under various denominations.¹²

He often referred to Sanskrit, the language of "the Hindu race," as the "primeval fountain of literature" from which all culture "sprung."¹³ In his introduction to 'A Hymn to Narayena', for instance, he asserted that "a complete introduction to the following Ode would be no less than a full comment on the Vayds and the Purans of the Hindus, the remains of Egyptian and Persian Theology, and the tenets of the Ionic and Italic schools."¹⁴ This article proposes that the "mighty fountain" of Xanadu is in fact a conscious allusion to Jones' hypothetical "primeval fountain of Indian literature," and

⁹ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

¹⁰ John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (London: Constable & Company, 1952), pp. 364-83.

¹¹ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

¹² Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 135.

¹³ Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, pp. 34, 325.

¹⁴ William Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones* (London: Press of C. Whittingham, 1822), p. 202.

that Coleridge's vision of an archetypal Oriental landscape, through which the river Alph somehow centers the geographies of China, Africa, Greece and America in the religious heartland of India, was intended as an imaginative reconstruction of 'the primitive world' that Jones had hypothetically envisaged, in which the people of that time shared an "affinity," or unity, of culture that had "sprung from the common source of the Hindu race." Ever since the seminal publication of *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), source studies of 'Kubla Khan' have tended to deal quite accurately with the influence of Eastern travel narratives on the poem, but what these approaches have tended to miss is how deeply religious Coleridge's interest in the 'East' really was.

Coleridge on Jones' Work and Indian Pantheism

Jones was aware that his hypothesis about the origins of religion was a challenge to biblical authority. He knew that

disquisitions concerning the manners and conduct of our species in early times, or indeed at any time ... may even be of solid importance in an age, when some intelligent and virtuous persons are inclined to doubt the authenticity of the accounts, delivered by Moses, concerning the primitive world.¹⁵

Although he could not "help believing [in] the divinity of the MESSIAH" and "the sanctity of the venerable books [especially those of ISAAH]," he remained confident in asserting that it was "not the truth of our national religion, as such, that I have at heart: it is truth itself; and, if any cool unbiased reasoner will clearly convince me, that Moses drew his narrative through Egyptian conduits from the primeval fountains of Indian literature, I shall esteem him as a friend."¹⁶

It was over twenty years after 'Kubla Khan' was supposed to have been originally composed that Coleridge first mentioned Jones' actual name in his published works, condemning Jones and his friend Sir Charles Wilkins in the 'Opus Maximum', after a passage from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for having "overrated ... the whole Brahman Theosophy."¹⁷ This outspoken attack towards the end of Coleridge's career has often led critics to single-mindedly

¹⁵ Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 324.

¹⁶ Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, p. 325.

¹⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Opus Maximum', in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 15, ed. Thomas McFarland (Princeton, U.S.: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 281-2.

assume that the poet, as a Christian apologist, never really took the Indologist's ideas seriously.

However, later in the very same essay, Coleridge acknowledged that he had, himself, at one time "paid [a] debt of homage... to the foreign potentates [deities]," which the "great linguists [Jones and Wilkins]" had first introduced to the West.¹⁸ Coleridge recounts that "all the notions, images, and feelings" of their translations, had, at one time, inspired in him a sense of "obscure awe."¹⁹ The best indication we have as to what Coleridge meant by this is a series of lectures he had given a few years earlier, between 1818 and 1819, on the History of Philosophy. During a discussion of Hellenistic polytheism, Coleridge had introduced the same passage from *The Bhagavad-Gita* as "an extract from a great poem of India where pantheism has displayed its banners and waved in victory over three hundred millions of men; and this has been published in England as a proof of sublimity beyond the excellence of Milton in the true adoration of the supreme being."²⁰

In the lecture, Coleridge spoke about pantheism as a "reverence of that something which instinctively we must conceive of as greater than ourselves," and which "excite[s] feelings of devotion and awe" that he had once believed to have been compatible with "true religious feeling in the hands of great philosophers."²¹ Here Coleridge seemed to have in mind the theory espoused by Jones that the philosopher, Pythagoras, had visited Egypt and India²²—the implication being that Hellenistic and Platonic thought fundamentally had their roots in the "primeval fountains of Indian literature" and its "Egyptian conduits." What we might infer from this is the "feelings of obscure awe," which Coleridge had acknowledged at one time experiencing, were ultimately derived from his fascination, like Jones, with the "undoubted antiquity" of Indian pantheism.²³

Perhaps the single most illuminating expression that we have of Coleridge's "obscure awe" is a letter that Coleridge sent to John Thelwall in October 1797, in which he told his friend that

¹⁸ Coleridge, 'Opus Maximum', p. 282.

¹⁹ Coleridge, 'Opus Maximum', p. 281.

²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy', in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 8, ed. J. Jackson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 130.

²¹ Coleridge, 'Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy', p. 130

²² Coleridge, 'Lectures 1818-1819 on the History of Philosophy', pp. 65-6.

²³ Coleridge, 'Opus Maximum', p. 282.

My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great—something one & indivisible—and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty! ... [some]times I adopt the Brahman Creed, & say ... I should much wish, like the Indian Vishna, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos, & wake once in a million years for a few minutes—just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more.²⁴

That Coleridge articulated his religious impulses towards the natural world as though they were analogous with “Vishnu ... float[ing] along an infinite ocean” is quite remarkable for the time. His language of the “something one & indivisible” seems surely to derive from a passage in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (translated in 1785) about the nature of Brahma:

Learn that He by whom all things were formed is *incorruptible*, and that no one is able to effect the destruction of It which is *inexhaustible*. These finite bodies, which envelop the souls inhabiting them, are said to belong to Him, the eternal, the *indestructible*, unprovable Spirit, who is in the body ... it is without birth and meeteth not death; it is ancient, constant, and eternal, and is not slain when this its mortal frame is destroyed ... it is *incorruptible*, eternal, *inexhaustible*, and without birth ... for it is *indivisible*, *inconsumable*, *incorruptible* ... it is eternal, universal, permanent, *immovable*; it is *invisible*, *inconceivable*, and *unalterable*.²⁵

The implication of Coleridge’s letter here is that his sense of sublimity towards nature—his sense of “something one & indivisible”—was, at this time, deeply inspired by his “adopt[ion of the] Brahman Creed” of Indian pantheism. It is surely this religious interest in India, and this fascination with nature as an articulation of spirituality, which will elucidate our understanding of the rocks and caverns of ‘Kubla Khan’ most of all.

Coleridge’s and Southey’s Orientalist Sources

One of the problems that stands in the way of proving that Jones’ ideas directly influenced ‘Kubla Khan’ is that, as one might expect, no comprehensive record of the poet’s ‘Orientalist’ reading has ever been known to exist. What evidence we do have comes from: (1) the 1816 Preface to ‘Kubla Khan’, in which Coleridge mentions—rather uselessly—that the

²⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Letter 209’, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 1, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), pp. 349-51.

²⁵ *The Bhagvat-Geeta*, trans. Charles Wilkins (London: C. Nourse, 1785), pp. 36-7.

poem was inspired by a “sentence ... in ‘Purchas’s Pilgrimage’”;²⁶ (2) the miscellaneous corpora of Coleridge’s manuscript culture (that is, his and his contemporaries’ published letters, notebooks and unfinished works etc.), which can be used to partially reconstruct a list of the poet’s reading, and; (3) the poem itself—of which a close examination might reveal analogues, and therefore possible sources. The question over the actual date of the poem’s original composition, however, has always complicated source studies of ‘Kubla Khan’. In the 1816 preface, Coleridge claimed that the poem had been written “in the summer of 1797” in “a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire.”²⁷ Yet since then, a series of alternative dates and theories have been suggested: E. H. Coleridge (1912) supposed the early summer of 1798 and this was the date which J. L. Lowes assumed in his source study (completely neglecting Jones as an influence).²⁸ In 1934, however, the discovery of the Crewe Manuscript revealed that Coleridge had once believed the poem to have first been written not in the “summer,” but in “the fall of the year 1797.”²⁹ The poet’s apparent inconsistency over the issue of dating ‘Kubla Khan’ instigated a series of more skeptical studies in the 1950s, led by Elisabeth Schneider (1953), which posit an entirely new date as late as October 1799, or May-June of the following year (1800).³⁰ It was during this period, when Schneider’s hypothesis was beginning to supersede Lowes’, that Jones’ influence on ‘Kubla Khan’ was first significantly considered.

Both Schneider herself and later Warren Ober (1959) explored the possibility that Coleridge’s collaboration with Robert Southey may have given the poet access to his friend’s ‘Orientalist’ reading materials for *Thalaba the Destroyer*, among which was the third volume of Jones’ *Asiatick Researches*, and his *Poems, Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Tongues*. The latter included Jones’ ‘Essay on the Poetry of Eastern

²⁶ Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 180.

²⁷ Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 180.

²⁸ Ernest Hartley Coleridge (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 295; Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 356.

²⁹ Coleridge, *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 180.

³⁰ Schneider, Elisabeth, *Coleridge, Opium, and ‘Kubla Khan’* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 236.

Nations', and 'The Palace of Fortune'.³¹ The basis of Schneider's argument has been given greater currency in more recent years by Tim Fulford's revisionist theory, which postulates that 'Kubla Khan' was an Orientalist poem which benefited from the author's collaboration with Southey as it evolved over several years—that it may have first been written in 1797 or 1798, but it is probable that it was revised again in the company of Southey between 1799-1800.³²

Coleridge's Early Interactions with Jones' Work

The fundamental problem with Schneider's hypothesis about the composition of 'Kubla Khan' is that it presumes Coleridge's knowledge of Jones to have been far more dependent upon the poet's collaboration with Southey at the turn of the century than it really was. As we have already seen, Jones' influence was likely present before then. We know that between 1794-5, Southey invited Coleridge to Bristol, and that the two poets spent a great deal of time together during this period, planning and discussing how they were going to realise their vision of Pantisocracy in America.³³ Of course, Southey's and Coleridge's fascination with the New World travel literature, which formed the basis of their knowledge of American topography, cannot be easily separated from their interest in Orientalist books—both of which, as we have established, became significant sources for their literary work, including 'Kubla Khan'. It was also during this time that Southey first introduced Coleridge to the Beddoes circle in Bristol. Dr. John Beddoes was in fact a keen Orientalist himself, having experimented with his own Oriental project, *Alexander's Expedition down the Hydaspes and the Indus to the Indian Ocean* (1792), which Southey had read.³⁴ Although Coleridge had never met Beddoes' friend, it was because of his association with the Bristol Circle that Coleridge first instigated a correspondence with John Thelwall.³⁵ It is also from this period that

³¹ Warren Ober, 'Southey, Coleridge, and *Kubla Khan*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 58, no. 3 (1959), pp. 414-22.

³² Tim Fulford, 'Coleridge's Sequel to *Thalaba* and Robert Southey's Prequel to *Christabel*', in *Coleridge, Romanticism and the Orient*, ch. 3.

³³ Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship* (Newark, U.S.: University of Delaware Press, 2002), ch. 3.

³⁴ Alexander Iskandar, 'Oriental Geography and Romantic Poetry', in *Reorienting Orientalism*, ed. Chandreyee Niyogi, (New Delhi: Sage, 2006), p. 40.

³⁵ Taussig, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship*, ch. 5.

Coleridge actually first acknowledged his awareness of Jones' work, logging the title of the linguist's first major work, *The Ordinances of Manu*, in his notes for 1795-7.³⁶ Whether or not Coleridge read Jones' book on Hindu law, however, is unclear and it seems unlikely that the book on its own truly inspired Coleridge's aesthetic interest in Indian religion.

More importantly, it was also during this same period that Coleridge expressed in his notebook the intention of writing "Hymns to the Sun, the Moon, and the Elements—six hymns" on the "Tremendities of Nature."³⁷ It is very probable that this notion was inspired by Coleridge's knowledge of the six Hymns that Jones had composed to Hindu deities in *Asiatick Miscellany* (1785). In this work the Indologist had sought, in emulation of his animist interpretation of Oriental theology, "to personify the most abstract notions, and to place a nymph or a genius in every grove."³⁸ That Coleridge associated the Hymns he planned to write with Indian mythography is surely beyond doubt if we examine a later entry in Coleridge's notebook, entitled 'Hymns [-] Moon'. Coleridge left himself a reminder to "read the whole 107th page of Maurice's Indostan," referring to a passage about "the new moon" and "an Image of Ice," "in a cave in the mountains of Cashmere."³⁹ It is probable that the image in 'Kubla Khan' of the "caves of ice" (or "the fountain and the caves")⁴⁰ partly derives from this following passage from *The History of Hindostan*:

I have already noticed the remarkable circumstance of 360 fountains... sacred to the moon, at Kehrah, a town in Cashmere; Cashmere, probably [being] *the most early residence of the Brahmins, and the theatre of the purest rites of their theology. In a cave of the same mountainous subah a very singular phenomenon is said, in the Ayeen Akbery, at certain periods to make its appearance... In this cave, says Abul Fazil, is sometimes to be seen an image of ice, called AMERNAUT, which is holden in great veneration.*⁴¹

³⁶ Garland Cannon, 'A New, Probable Source for "Kubla Khan"', *College English*, vol.17, no. 3 (1955), pp. 136-7.

³⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5.

³⁸ Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, pp. 321-2.

³⁹ Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁴¹ Thomas Maurice, *The History of Hindostan*, Volume 1 (London: W. Bulmer, 1795), pp. 107-8.

Maurice's notion that Cashmere was "probably the most early residence of the Brahmins, and the theatre of the purest rites of their theology" likely derived from Jones' hypothesis.⁴² In *Hindostan*, he often refers to "the authority of Sir William Jones" in relation to the Sanskrit origins of "primeval mythology."⁴³ One can imagine Coleridge noting down Maurice's description of Kashmiri 'theology' here as though he had found a perfect image for Jones' "primeval fountain," and for his own "hymns"—which were to find their culmination in 'Kubla Khan'.

'Kubla Khan' and Jones' Hymns to Ganga and Lacschmi

It was Garland Cannon who, in light of Schneider's theory back in the 1950s, first proposed that Coleridge had read 'A Hymn to Ganga'.⁴⁴ Since then, critics have generally neglected the analogue, but it seems as though a close examination of Jones' Hymn may possibly elucidate the intentions of Coleridge as the author of 'Kubla Khan'. Jones introduces 'A Hymn to Ganga' by telling his reader that

we are obliged to a late illustrious Chinese monarch named Canhi, who directed an accurate survey to be made of ... Tebbut [Tibet], for our knowledge, that a chain of mountains nearly parallel with Imaus [the Himalayas] ... forms a line of separation between the sources of two vast rivers; which, as we have abundant reason to believe, run at first in two opposite directions, and, having finished a winding circuit of two thousand miles, meet a little below Dhaca, so as to enclose the richest and most beautiful peninsula on earth.⁴⁵

As Cannon has shown, the course of the rivers Ganga and Brahmaputra in Jones' poem resemble Coleridge's description of Alph's journey through the gardens of Xanadu in such a number of ways that the influence of 'A Hymn to Ganga' on 'Kubla Khan' surely cannot be denied.⁴⁶ That Coleridge may even have connected the river Ganges in India with that of the river Alpheus in Greece is clearly suggested by Jones in the introduction to his poem, when he tells his reader that it is the belief of some geographers that the progress of the Brahmaputra can be very probably traced to a course "by the Persian gulf to Syria, and from that coast into

⁴² John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 52.

⁴³ Maurice, *The History of Hindostan*, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁴ Cannon, 'A New, Probable Source for "Kubla Khan"', p. 136.

⁴⁵ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 216.

⁴⁶ Cannon, 'A New, Probable Source for "Kubla Khan"', pp. 138-9.

Greece and Italy.”⁴⁷ If the river Alph can be connected to the river Ganga and its tributaries, then one might suppose that its function is to geographically and metaphorically link together the topographies of China, Persia, and Greece, whilst simultaneously centering them in the religious heartland of Northern India.

In his introduction to ‘A Hymn to Ganga’, having described the course of the two rivers, “which run at first in two opposite directions... so as to enclose the richest and most beautiful peninsula on earth,” Jones goes on to explain that “those rivers are *deified* in India; that, which rises on the western edge of the mountain [*Ganga*], being considered as the daughter of... Siva, and the other [*Brahmaputra*] as the son of Brahma: their loves, wanderings, and nuptials, are the chief subjects of the following Ode.”⁴⁸ It seems entirely possible that Coleridge’s ideas about the river Alph are based on the Ganga of Jones’ Hymn. In classical mythology, Alpheus was also a river god; his lover, Arethusa, by bathing in his waters, was turned first into a river and then into a fountain on the island of Ortygia. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how Alpheus flows under the sea in order to be reunited with his beloved fountain.⁴⁹ In ‘Kubla Khan’, when Alph is into “a mighty fountain momentarily ... forced,”⁵⁰ it might be supposed that Coleridge intended this moment to specifically allude to the dramatic and archetypal event, chronicled in Jones’ work, of Ganga’s reunion with her lover Brahmputra.

The idea that the river Alph is indeed a deity who becomes two deities intermingled is certainly suggested by the way in which Coleridge portrays the river’s “mazy motion”⁵¹ through the gardens of Xanadu. The first thing we might note is the anthropomorphic depiction of the river “mid dancing rocks.” The image surely reminds us of the Ganga in Jones’ poem when she, having flowed through “Himola’s perennial snow,” comes “dancing from her diamond [icy] cave.”⁵² That the caverns from which Alph breaks free are “caves of ice” implies that the “ancient hills” which form the backdrop of the landscape in ‘Kubla Khan’ are indeed the very same mountains of the “snowy Himalayas,” which Jones alludes to, delaying Ganges’ reunion with

⁴⁷ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 217.

⁴⁸ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 216.

⁴⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Translation*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 202-3.

⁵⁰ Coleridge, ‘Kubla Khan’, p. 182.

⁵¹ Coleridge, ‘Kubla Khan’, p. 182.

⁵² Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 223.

her lover.⁵³ The hills of the first stanza of Coleridge's poem, from which the river has come, then, can be understood as resembling an obstruction to the fulfillment of the deities' love. The haunting sound of "a woman wailing for her demon-lover," coming from the "enchanted cedarn cover" by the river⁵⁴—much like the "wailings" of the voice heard from the "enchanted mount" past which Jones' Ganga flows⁵⁵—seem to articulate the desperation of the goddess' unfulfilled love. That the river, as it is submerged in the chasm, is described as "seething" could simply be interpreted as referring to the physically turbulent behaviour of the water (similar, for instance, to the way that Coleridge's brother describes the Hotwell at Monghyr, "in which the water continually boils"); yet the verb can, in its anthropomorphic sense, also be seen to imply an intensity of strong emotional feeling, particularly of anger or unexpressed frustration—the kind of emotions that one might expect from a lover whose desire is obstructed and unfulfilled.

As Coleridge's poem goes on, we are told that from this chasm the sacred river is eventually "flung up momentarily" and that the river, as it "bursts" vividly into a fountain, brings the earth to life—according to the simile—as if it were "*breathing*".⁵⁶ Much like Ganga's "panting,"⁵⁷ the descriptions of the "fast thick pants" of the earth, and the violent "burst[ing]" of the mighty fountain, do imply that the river is endowed with some kind of powerful sexual energy.⁵⁸ The tremendous force of the fountain, as it "vaults... huge fragments" into the air "like rebounding hail,"⁵⁹ reminds us of the dramatic description in Jones' poem of Ganga finally "blending her fierce waves" with her lover Brahma Putra.⁶⁰ Similar to Jones, throughout much of the poem, verbs that are used to depict the course of the river Alph are often personified and given in the form of active present participles ("meandering," "seething," "breathing," "rebounding," "dancing"), which become part of an ebullient expression of the river's own vitality and sexuality. It is as though Alph animates the natural landscape, as though it is endowed with animistic and life-giving powers.

⁵³ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 224.

⁵⁴ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁵⁵ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 225.

⁵⁶ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁵⁷ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 224.

⁵⁸ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁵⁹ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁶⁰ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 226.

The implication of the reunion of the rivers seems to be that it brings fertility to the landscape. In Jones' Hymn, we are told that the "sonorous rivers"—Ganges and her tributaries—having descended from the Himalayas, "o'er thirsty deserts, youth and freshness throw, while buxom Lacshmi crowns their bed."⁶¹ Just as Ganga's reunion with Brahmaputra transforms the "autumnal" lands below the mountains into "fertile plains,"⁶² so too does the fountain of Alph nourish the "fertile ground" of the landscape in 'Kubla Khan'.⁶³ What we can see emerging from this closer examination of the poem is an archetypal mythic narrative form in which the river deity, having been separated from its lover in the barren lands of the "snowy Himola," is finally reunited with its long-lost love, restoring fertility to the landscape.

That it is Lacshmi who "crowns the bed" of Ganga and Brahmaputra's reunion is of the utmost importance. Coleridge would have associated the course of the river Alph with Lacshmi because in the Introduction to 'A Hymn to Ganga' Jones mentions that she is the potentate of one of the islands formed by the course of Ganga's tributaries.⁶⁴ This seems to also explain the landscape's geographical proximity to the ocean.⁶⁵ Lacshmi, in 'A Hymn to Ganga', is described as "sounding ocean smiles"—she is the "daughter of Ocean."⁶⁶ Were Coleridge also to have read Jones' adjacent 'Hymn to Lacshmi', he would have found Jones' assertion in the introduction that Lacshmi—as "the Goddess of Abundance ... or Prosperity"—"constituted at this moment the prevailing religion of India."⁶⁷ Informing us of the legend that Lacshmi had "sprung from a *Sea of Milk*" (which surely Coleridge's "milk of Paradise" is an allusion to), Jones tells us that the goddess "is the *preserving power* of nature, or, in the language of allegory, the consort of Vishnu... derived from the names of the Lotos."⁶⁸ We presumably now have a clear source for Coleridge's vision of wanting "to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotos... like the Indian Vishnu" and it is therefore very possible that the "mighty fountain" of 'Kubla Khan' is indeed a Jonesian vision of the mythological

⁶¹ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 223-6.

⁶² Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 223-5.

⁶³ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁶⁴ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 220.

⁶⁵ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁶⁶ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 226.

⁶⁷ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 192-3.

⁶⁸ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 192-3.

union of the archetypal ‘Oriental’ god and goddess—of Laschmi and Vishnu, of Ganga and Brahma Putra.

A closer look at the ‘Hymn to Lacshmi’ may also reveal the identity of Coleridge’s speaker in ‘Kubla Khan’. In Jones’ Hymn, Sudaman, a Brahman who has been “sever’d from the blissful seat,” goes in search of the shepherd god Dwaraca and his “all-bounteous queen” Lacshmi, or Rucmini as she is called here. Having ended his quest, “ungifted” by fortune, Sudaman suddenly has an incredible view of “many a sumptuous dome... on granite columns”—a “lovely scene more than human!” We are told that, having “*drank deep the strange delight*,” he sees “*brisk fountains dance, crisp rivulets wind/ O’er borders trim, and round inwoven bowers*” and that from the palace gates

*A maiden legion, touching tuneful strings,
Descending strow’d with flowers the brighten’d way
And straight... their vacant centre show’d
Their chief, whose vesture glow’d
With carbuncles and smiling pearls atween;
And o’er her head a veil translucent flow’d,
Which dropping light disclosed a beauteous queen,
Who, breathing love, and swift with timid grace,
Sprang to her lord’s embrace.⁶⁹*

That the speaker’s vision of “the Abyssinian maid,” or the “damsel with a dulcimer,” is inspired by Jones’ “maiden[s] ... touching tuneful strings” is highly possible—to such an extent that Jones’ Hymn is a very likely source for Coleridge’s vision in ‘Kubla Khan’.

What is perhaps most exciting about the discovery of this analogue is the possibility that the inspiration for the speaker of ‘Kubla Khan’—which has been forever elusive—may in fact become recognised as Sudaman, the “Brahman young” of Jones’ poem. That Coleridge would have associated the speaker of his own Hymn with a Brahman character much like Jones’ would have been suggested to him by the linguist’s declaration that “the following Ode ... is feigned to have been the work of a Brahman, in an early age of Hindu antiquity.”⁷⁰ The “deep delight” of the speaker in ‘Kubla Khan’, who “on honey-dew hath fed,” is certainly reminiscent of Jones’ description of the Brahman drinking “deep the strange delight” of Ganga’s “nectar.”⁷¹ If

⁶⁹ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 197-9.

⁷⁰ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 216.

⁷¹ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 223.

the allusion was intended, the foreboding cries of "Beware! Beware!" and the sense of "holy dread" at the end of Coleridge's poem would be largely elucidated. As Sudaman's vision of the groves dies towards the end of Jones' Hymn, "dire forms of death," we are told, "spread havoc" throughout the land as the presence of Lacshmi's "preserving power ... fades."⁷² The image of "the lifeless ocean"⁷³ then, in 'Kubla Khan', seems to be prophetic of the disappearance of the goddess' animating powers. It is as though the river Alph is "the *female* divinity, in the mythological systems [of] the East" who, in Jones' words, functioned as an "allegory" for the "temporary destruction and regeneration ... of natural phenomena"—she is a deity who constantly dies and is reborn.⁷⁴

Conclusion

A closer examination of 'Kubla Khan' in relation to Jones' Hymns certainly indicates that Coleridge's knowledge of the Indologist may have been far more significant than has been hitherto acknowledged. Although it is consensually agreed that Coleridge's interest in Orientalism steadily declined towards the end of his career, it seems probable that 'Kubla Khan' marks a more radical point in time when the poet's interest in 'Eastern' religions was much more profound.

Rather than simply interpreting the poem as a static image of a Chinese 'Oriental' garden, it may be supposed, in light of Jones' influence, that Coleridge had always intended 'Kubla Khan' to be a mythographic poem which finds its meaning in embodying the motif that Jones had proven to be archetypal in the religions influenced by India: of the goddess' perpetual separation and reunion with her lover. That the "mighty fountain" of Xanadu is at once the Hotwell of the Indian Ganga, and yet also an archetypal symbol transcending continents, implies that the fundamental idea which Coleridge was engaging with at the time that 'Kubla Khan' was written was Jones' notion that all the "population[s], knowledge[s], language[s], and arts" of mankind's 'primitive past' had their origins in the "primeval fountain" of "the Hindu race." That Coleridge is posing in 'Kubla Khan' as a "Brahma young," like Jones' Sudaman, is an exciting idea. We might concur with E.

⁷² Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, p. 201.

⁷³ Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan', p. 182.

⁷⁴ Jones, *The Poems of Sir William Jones*, pp. 157-8.

S. Shaffer that behind Coleridge's conception of himself as a prophet-poet, there is always visible that archetype of the "great Oriental figure": the universal primitive bard, the bard of the Tartars and of the Celts and of the Americans, the bard of the Neo-platonic mysteries and of the early Christians ... maintaining for his community their touch with the nether and the upper worlds. And the modern poet justly stands here too: for romanticism calls all vision in question, while affirming it.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ E. S. Shaffer, *'Kubla Khan' and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 92.