

The Wordsworth-Coleridge Association

[The Wordsworth-Coleridge Association](#) is sponsoring a [festive lunch](#) and [two scholarly sessions](#) at the 2018 convention of the Modern Language Association in New York City.

Here is a descriptive summary of the second session:

Session 645:

Word and Image in British Romanticism

Program arranged by the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association

Presiding: Jonathan Farina, Seton Hall University

Saturday, January 6, 3:30-4:45 p.m.

1. "Antislavery Satire before Abolitionism: Two New Images," Deirdre Patricia Coleman, University of Melbourne
2. "Blake's Wollstonecraft's Girls," Elizabeth Fay, University of Massachusetts Boston
3. "Hebrew Micrography in the Works of William Blake," Sarah Stein, Arkansas Tech University
4. "The Game of Human Life: Late Romantic Amusement, Social Class, and Illustration," Rosetta Young, University of California, Berkeley

This session explores the complex interaction of word and image during the British Romantic period. Taking its cue from certain newly-discovered materials, and offering bold new critical approaches, the session offers a fresh look at the interplay of word and image in the production of literary and artistic artifacts. The presenters in this session will examine some newly discovered sketches that illuminate the practice of slavery in the West Indies; they will delve into the gender-coded meanings of Blake's illustrations to Mary Wollstonecraft's stories for children; they will present a surprising discovery of Hebrew micrography in Blake's illustrations to the Book of Job; and they will elucidate the use of image and text to simulate social experience in a collection of late Romantic games and amusements. All four of these presentations break fresh ground in the analysis of word and image in this period, going well beyond previous scholarship in their investigation of visual and textual materials. All four presenters will provide well-integrated AV presentations to develop and illustrate their findings.

These four proposals have emerged from a rigorous peer review by qualified members of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association of over twenty proposals received on this topic, a measure of the keen interest by many leading scholars of British Romanticism in the investigation of the production of meaning at the interface of visual and textual artifacts. The session was also approved on a rigorous competitive basis by MLA peer reviewers. These four papers were chosen on the basis of their originality and relevance to the announced topic, as well as their complementary approaches to a common core of emerging issues in the larger contexts of social

and cultural history. Each paper makes a distinctive contribution to the field of British Romantic Studies and will be considered for publication in our journal, *The Wordsworth Circle*.

The session will operate well within the allotted time through careful preparation and explicit guidance from the presider, a distinguished scholar who has moderated many MLA sessions.

The four individual presentations, despite their fascinating variety of content and diversity of theoretical approach, all relate closely to the topic of the session.

1. The first presentation, “**Antislavery Satire before Abolitionism: Two New Images**” by Deirdre Coleman, examines the writings and sketches of Henry Smeathman (1742-86), a self-taught dealer in natural history who spent eight years collecting in the tropics in the 1770s. He presents an interesting case of someone who, originally versed in anti-slavery by one of his sponsors, turned to slave trading on the African coast. This defection from earlier principles was reversed by first-hand experience of plantation slavery on the ceded islands, Grenada and Tobago. Two sketches drawn by him in the West Indies, later engraved and published by a London dealer in 1788 at the height of abolitionism, have recently surfaced in America. These sketches, which illustrate two contrasting scenes of whipping, form a companion pair, capturing the complexities of gender, public/private spectacle, and national differences. The public flogging is presided over by white men, the private whipping by white women. Coleman’s paper will illustrate the ways in which these sketches are a decade ahead of their time in terms of their political satire.
2. The second presentation, “**Blake’s Wollstonecraft’s Girls**” by Elizabeth Fay, examines *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), Mary Wollstonecraft’s early stab at writing books that would appeal to a popular audience. The second edition published by the bookseller Joseph Johnson in 1791 had an additional vehicle for transmission of ideas: illustrations, produced by William Blake and commissioned by Johnson. As Wollstonecraft argues persuasively in her later *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, women are socialized to indulge their emotions and to believe that romantic love leads naturally and inevitably to the manipulative behavior of disempowered women, at the cost of their minds and goodness. But Blake understood affective relations differently in his own later work, distinguishing the purifying negative power of political rage and the productive positive power of sexual love from self-destructive passions such as hate and manipulative or possessive forms of affection. Fay will argue that Blake’s response to Wollstonecraft’s morality can be understood by comparing the styles of engraving that he uses for *Original Stories* and for *Songs of Innocence*.
3. The third presentation, “**Hebrew Micrography in the Works of William Blake**” by Sarah Stein, considers the possible influence on Blake of the Hebrew art form of micrography, the use of miniature Hebrew script to create designs and images. Stein contends that in many of Blake’s plates, especially in the *Laocoön* print and in his *Illustrations to the Book of Job*, the influence of micrography can be clearly seen, and that this influence helps illuminate the relationship between text and image in Blake’s work. By undermining a clear distinction between the visual and the textual, and between the central and the marginal, Blake’s micrographic technique calls forth a vision of language that is at once a force of divine creation and an embodiment of earthly materiality.

4. The final presentation, **“The Game of Human Life: Late Romantic Amusement, Social Class, and Illustration”** by Rosetta Young, examines a collection of Romantic games and amusements, elucidating their use of image and text to simulate social experience for their (often juvenile) players. Young will speak to four games produced from 1815 to 1823 and currently housed at the Yale Center for British Art. All of these games revolve around the recognition of established social “types” in early nineteenth-century life and depicted through descriptions and illustrations: for example, “Conversation Cards” show an engraved depiction of a person with a rhyming couplet underneath, and players had to guess the “type” based on the lines of verse. Young will argue that that these games allowed early nineteenth-century middle-class players to express both their anxiety and their delight at society’s increasingly mutable social hierarchy, allowing players to experience the abstracted thrill of elevation of station and the fear of social decline. In this way, the playing of these games provided a novel simulation of lived social experience.