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### CHARLES LAMB AND THE READER OF DRAMA

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Since the publication of Wayne Booth's study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1963, much critical attention has been given to the responses of readers to texts. Writers like Stanley Fish, Walter Slatoff, and Wolfgang Iser have explored the act of reading poetry and fiction. However, few twentieth-century critics have taken any interest in the reader's reactions to plays, perhaps because they define drama as solely a performing art.

Recently, the burgeoning of motion pictures based on dramas, novels, and short stories has forced critics to examine the advantages and disadvantages of such adaptations. While commentators like Jack J Jorgens view films as "truest to the effect of Shakespeare's dramatic verse," other scholars complain that movies are too concerned with setting and other external details and thus neglect more important themes. According to Siegfried Kracauer, "Films cling to the surfaces of things. They seem to be the more cinematic, the less they focus directly on inward life, ideology, and spiritual concerns." Seymour Chatman and Wolfgang Iser have observed that films of literary works affect viewers very differently from the way the original novel or short story affects readers. Chatman argues, "Film narrative possesses a plenitude of visual details, an excessive particularity compared to the verbal version...But...unlike painting or sculpture, narrative films do not usually allow us time to dwell on plenteous details. Pressure from the narrative component is too great. Events move too fast." Wolfgang Iser goes even further in his discussion of Fielding's novel and the movie version of *Tom Jones*. Iser contends that the numerous details of the motion picture limit viewers' imaginative responses.

While reading *Tom Jones*, they may never have had a clear conception of what the hero actually looks like, but on seeing the film, some may say, "That's not how I imagined him." The point here is that the reader of *Tom Jones* is able to visualize the hero virtually for himself, and so his imagination senses the vast number of possibilities; the moment these possibilities are narrowed down to one complete and immutable picture, the imagination is put out of action, and we feel we have somehow been cheated.<sup>1</sup>

None of these critics mention Charles Lamb's essay, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation" (1811). Here, Lamb insists that all of Shakespeare's tragedies suffer from performance, and he examines *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *Othello* to determine why they have a greater impact when read. This essay has been considered eccentric by most twentieth-century commentators. In this article, I hope to show that "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare" is not an aberration. The arguments are consistent with Lamb's overall approach to reading literature. Furthermore, many of his conclusions

anticipate those of Chatman, Kracauer, and Iser and are remarkably close in spirit to the film criticism of these men.

It seems strange that Lamb, who often celebrates the theater in his letters and essays, could write "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare." He attended Drury Lane and Covent Garden frequently, wrote reviews of various plays for London periodicals, had his comedy, *Mr H*, produced, and even fell in love with the actress, Fanny Kelly. In a note to Robert Lloyd, Lamb insists, "...A crowd of happy faces justling into the playhouse at the hour of six is a more beautiful spectacle to man than the shepherd driving his 'silly' sheep to fold---- ----." Also, in "My First Play," Elia calls the theater "the most delightful of recreations."<sup>2</sup> However, Lamb distinguishes carefully between dramatic genres which he feels succeed on stage and those which do not. In general, he finds comedy well suited to performance, especially "artificial comedy" (comedy of manners). But Lamb consistently expresses reservations about the staging of tragedy. His main criterion is the effect of the genre on an audience.

John I Ades has observed, "In all of Lamb's Shakespearean criticism he commends only one tragic performance as completely successful: a production of *Othello* in which Robert Bensley played Iago."<sup>3</sup> Lamb believed that the best tragedies should be read, not performed. This conviction grew out of the romantic writer's veneration for the act of reading literature. Lamb spent most of his free time with his books, according to his own testimony: "When I am not walking, I am reading." He compared reading to having a private "chapel" or "oratory." Furthermore, Lamb castigates those who do not take reading seriously enough. This is his complaint in "Readers Against the Grain": more Englishmen are literate, and publications are more affordable, but the average reader's experience has degenerated into a fashionable hobby. "We read to say that we have read... These are your readers against the grain, who yet *must* read or be thought nothing of - who, crawling through a book with tortoise-pace, go creeping to the next Review to learn what they shall say of it."<sup>4</sup> This passive, unimaginative response to books disgusts the essayist. If people cannot become actively involved in what they read, they should avoid literature.

Lamb views the ideal relationship between a writer and a reader as that of two intelligent and creative friends. Over and over, Lamb insists that both authors and readers must cooperate with and challenge one another. The writer must avoid patronizing the reader or beating him over the head with an argument. In turn, the reader must allow the writer imaginative freedom, even if the author's statements conflict with the reader's viewpoint. No one who is not open-minded can appreciate good literature. Lamb often speaks of this relationship as if there were a contract between the two parties. He complains to Wordsworth that "The Cumberland Beggar" contains passages which

are too direct and like a lecture: they dont slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter.-An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told, I will teach you how to think upon this subject. This fault, if I am right, is in a ten thousandth worse degree to be found in *Sterne* and many many novelists & modern poets, who continually put a sign post up to shew *where you are to feel*. They set out with assuming their readers to be stupid. Very different from *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Vicar of Wakefie*[l]d, *Roderick Random*, and other beautiful bare narratives. - There is implied an unwritten compact between Author and reader; I will tell you a story, and I suppose you

will understand it.<sup>5</sup>

Twentieth-century critics like Fish, Slatoff, and Iser share this perspective. They view reading as an active and creative process and have tried to make literary criticism more sensitive to the role of the reading public. Stanley Fish writes in *Surprised by Sin* (1967), "Meaning is an event, something that happens, not on the page, where we are accustomed to look for it, but in the interaction between the flow of print (or sound) and the actively mediating consciousness of a reader-hearer." In *With Respect to Readers*, Slatoff frequently cites with approval Coleridge's dictum that literature "brings the whole soul of man into activity." Slatoff argues, "... Because literature counts on it, the reader must bring his own consciousness and experience to bear." In *The Implied Reader* (1972, German edition), Iser argues that good authors design texts which "entangle" readers in the process of interpretation. He explores how authors like Fielding use various strategies "to open [the reader] up to the workings of the text."<sup>6</sup>

When readers break the unwritten contract described by Lamb, the results are disastrous: literary geniuses suffer from neglect. Reviewing *The Excursion*, Lamb denounces the public's response to Wordsworth's poetry.

The causes which have prevented the poetry of Mr. Wordsworth from attaining its full share of popularity are to be found in the boldness and originality of his genius. The times are past when a poet could securely follow the direction of his own mind into whatever tracts it might lead. A writer, who would be popular, must timidly coast the shore of prescribed sentiment and sympathy. He must have just as much more of the imaginative faculty than his readers, as will serve to keep their apprehensions from stagnating, but not so much as to alarm their jealousy. He must not think or feel too deeply.<sup>7</sup>

The contract between writers/artists and readers/viewers is the subject of much of Lamb's essay, "On the Genius and Character of Hogarth" (1811). Toward the beginning of the article, Lamb emphasizes, "In the perusal of a book, or of a picture, much of the impression which we receive depends upon the habit of mind which we bring with us to such perusal." While "superficial" viewers will merely laugh (or sneer) at Hogarth's low-life subjects, more thoughtful people will attain "sympathy" with his harlots, drunks, and rakes. Lamb frequently describes the works of Hogarth as "objects of meditation." The ideal viewer considers more than color and style when in an art gallery: he or she can penetrate these external elements to reach an understanding of "the poetical and almost prophetic conception in the artist." Lamb celebrates works of art and literature "where the spectator must meet the artist in his conceptions half way; and it is peculiar to the confidence of high genius alone to trust so much to spectators or readers. Lesser artists shew every thing distinct and full..."<sup>8</sup>

In a later essay on art and literature, "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art" (1833), Lamb distinguishes between "poetic" and "pictorial" subjects: "In the latter, the exterior accidents are nearly everything, the unseen qualities as nothing." The unimaginative pictorial artist will stress obvious external details, while the poetic painter will probe what is hidden by physical appearance. To illustrate "poetic" handling of characters, Lamb cites Shakespeare's development of Othello and Falstaff. Instead of emphasizing each man's body, the

playwright concentrates on "the respective moral or intellectual attributes of the character." Their thoughts and emotions outweigh their forms when the plays are read. However, in most pictures of the two characters, Othello's blackness and Sir John's corpulence predominate, blotting out their "moral or intellectual attributes."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Lamb was outraged by pictures of Shakespeare's heroines. In a letter to Samuel Rogers in 1833, the essayist complained that he felt "tied down" by portraits of Juliet and Imogen. Such illustrations will always fail because they attempt to "confine the illimitable."<sup>10</sup>

In many of his essays, Lamb tries to teach his readers how to go beyond external details and first impressions to reach a more profound understanding of art and literature.<sup>11</sup> The essay, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," is a good example of Lamb's attempts to broaden his public's imaginative horizons. It was published in 1811, shortly after the article on Hogarth. Just as Lamb emphasized the "meditative" quality of Hogarth's prints, he stresses Shakespeare's interest in the minds of his *dramatis personae*. Staged versions of Shakespeare's tragedies distort the protagonists because the theater accentuates the bodies and gestures of characters like Hamlet, Lear, and Richard III, while the dramatist is more interested in their intellects and their psychology.

Lamb begins "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare" with a protest against what he considered undue attention to actors at the expense of dramatic geniuses. Specifically, he objects to a plaque in Westminster Abbey which equates the talents of Shakespeare and David Garrick, the famous eighteenth-century actor. Lamb argues that there is no ground of comparison between the poet, who understands "the internal workings and movements of a great mind," and an actor, who merely imitates the external "signs" of passion.<sup>12</sup>

Like the film critic, Seymour Chatman, Lamb contrasts the "slow apprehension" allowed in reading drama to "the instantaneous nature of the impressions which we take in at the eye and ear at a playhouse." Because of this rapid parade of visual images and the prominence of the players, performances tend to elevate the actor over the playwright and may even cause the audience "to identify in our minds in a perverse manner, the actor with the character which he represents." Note Lamb's insistence here on first-person plural pronouns, which implicate both himself and his reading public in this misapprehension. The temptation to identify an actor with a tragic protagonist is most strong when good actors like John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons are on the stage. Lamb praises these "two great performers," but he laments the excessive "distinctness" of the theater: "When the novelty is past, we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood. We have let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance."<sup>13</sup>

Like Iser, Lamb finds that the overly specific images of a performance limit the imaginative freedom of the audience: "How cruelly this operates on the mind, to have its free conceptions thus cramped and pressed down to the measure of a strait-lacing actuality." Moreover, fancy props and elaborate gestures distance the spectators from the play. Lamb complains that an abundance of "non-essentials" forces the audience to watch like "a reviewer" or a "judge," instead of viewing the action sympathetically through the eyes of the protagonists.<sup>14</sup>

Lamb further denigrates acted drama by linking it to the common practice of excerpting significant passages from Shakespeare's plays for schoolboys and elocutionists to spout. This short digression is very effective rhetorically. Even twentieth-century readers groan when Lamb reminds us how often one hears "To be or not to be" declaimed out of context and "pawed about" until it has lost all meaning.<sup>15</sup>

Lamb observes that the subtleties of good drama are usually obscured by the actors' practice of over-emphasizing scenes of conflict and anger. These episodes of "coarse" passion appeal to "the eyes and ears of the spectators," just as bad art is merely "pictorial." Lamb acknowledges the popularity of such scenes, but he argues that "the best dramas," especially those of Shakespeare, use dialogue and soliloquy to convey to readers and spectators "knowledge of the inner structure and workings of mind in a character." Here again, the theater distorts drama by emphasizing externals and thus "reduces every thing to a controversy of elocution." The actors' emphasis on declamation wreaks havoc on the more delicate passages of Shakespeare's plays. Lamb uses assonance and consonance to stress the contrast between characters who should declaim loudly and those whose oratory is not appropriate: "Every character, from the boisterous blasphemings of Bajazet to the shrinking timidity of womanhood, must play the orator."<sup>16</sup>

"On the Tragedies of Shakspeare" is pervaded with antitheses, which emphasize the contrast between reading drama and seeing a performance. Oppositions of the imaginative and the material, the free and the restricted, abound in the essay. I have listed these antitheses below:

*Positive Attributes Associated  
with Reading Shakespeare*

the imagination  
the mind  
the intellectual  
internal  
depths of the sea  
meditation  
visions and dreams  
  
motives, impulses  
ideas, conceptions, understanding,  
apprehension  
abstraction  
thought  
the extraordinary, the supernatural  
illusion  
adulthood  
freedom, free conceptions

*Negative Attributes Associated  
with Performances*

the senses  
the body  
the physical, the corporal  
external  
the surface  
action  
the material, flesh and blood,  
substance  
gestures, tricks, voice  
ordinary perception, eyes and  
ears  
distinct shape, distinctness  
appearance, costume  
common life  
reality  
childhood  
restrictions, confinement, strait-  
lacing, laws, courts, cramping,  
pressing down

Of all Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Lear* suffer the most on stage. According to Lamb, Hamlet is a meditative, retiring man.<sup>17</sup> Because of the prince's temperament, it is awkward for him to appear before hundreds of spectators to utter his innermost thoughts in soliloquies. Lamb stresses Hamlet's reticence and contemplative nature by using many synonyms for the concepts. The prince indulges in "solitary

musings," "silent meditations," "light-and-noise-abhorring ruminations." Lamb refers to the character as "shy, negligent, retiring Hamlet."<sup>18</sup>

Lamb admits condescendingly that some members of the audience need the theater because they cannot read Shakespeare and be touched by his thought and passion. Perhaps the critic is thinking of "readers against the grain," as well as illiterate people. Lamb insists, "I am not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted."<sup>19</sup>

Actors tend to take certain scenes out of context when *Hamlet* is performed. Lamb notes that players always exaggerate the prince's harshness to Polonius and Ophelia, thus vulgarizing the passion and drawing undue attention to the offensive side of the hero's character. These tragedians neglect Hamlet's "soreness of mind," which is his motive for such conduct. The prince's madness should not be overdone but should fit into the overall pattern, "the whole of his character." Lamb doubts that even Garrick could have performed the role of Hamlet adequately. No matter how commanding his voice and his eyes were, these amounted to mere "physical properties" which could never capture the prince's "intellect."<sup>20</sup>

Just as Hamlet's mind is neglected in performance, the "rich intellect" of Richard the Third is buried under the "butcher-like representation of him that passes for him on the stage." The audience loses sight of "the profound, the witty, accomplished Richard." Lamb compares G F Cooke's King Richard to "the giants and ogres in children's books." The essayist implies that only a childlike audience can applaud such stereotyped acting. In contrast, readers can "qualify" their "horror" at Richard's crimes with an appreciation of his intellect.<sup>21</sup> Lamb uses rhetorical questions and first-person pronouns to implicate his readers in the argument.

*Macbeth* presents similar difficulties for the stage. Reading the tragedy offers a "vantage-ground of abstraction"<sup>22</sup> which prevents "the painful anxiety" of a theater audience. The stage version of *Macbeth* is too close to the reality of murder, while a reader can concentrate on "[t]he sublime images, the poetry alone."<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, watching old Lear "tottering about the stage with a walking stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting." The theater emphasizes the king's body too much. Lamb concludes, "... The Lear of Shakspeare cannot be acted ... The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual ..." Lear is even harder to act than Richard III or Macbeth because the audience needs to identify intensely with the former in order for the tragedy to have its full impact. "On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear... The play is beyond all art..."<sup>24</sup> While the spectator at a comedy of manners must distance himself from the characters, the reader of *King Lear* must feel close to the suffering protagonist.

In the opening paragraphs of the essay, Lamb had criticized facile comparisons between Shakespeare and Garrick. In the middle of the essay, Lamb attacks another false comparison, the common remark that *Othello's* "natural" quality resembles that of *George Barnwell*. He views Lillo's play as a "nauseous sermon" which cannot be likened to Shakespeare's tragedy because *George Barnwell* lacks the psychological insight of *Othello*. The presentation of *Othello* in a theater tends to flatten the characters until the play seems similar to inferior dramas. Thus, the "common auditor"

cannot perceive "the texture of Othello's mind, the inward construction marvellously laid open." Though *Othello* seems more feasible for the stage than *Lear*, it fails almost as miserably. The theater overwhelms our imagination's view of the Moor, and we "sink Othello's mind in his colour." Note that Lamb's argument here resembles his complaints about pictures of Othello in "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art."<sup>25</sup>

Lamb finds the caresses of black Othello and white Desdemona "extremely revolting" on stage. Some literary critics have accused Lamb of "a benighted racism" in his remarks. However, the issue seems more complicated. Joan Coldwell points out that "only recently some who saw the 'coal-black' Olivier in the film version confessed to a similar sense of outrage."<sup>26</sup> In the context of "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," Lamb's objections should not be read as an indictment of intermarriage but rather as a protest against how the theater ruins a powerful tragedy by distancing the audience too much. He clarifies his position in a footnote which compares the portrayal of Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the uncomfortably naked figures in most paintings. Milton can bestow "Paradisaical senses" on the reader which prevent anyone from viewing the poem as pornography. *Othello* also causes the reader to perceive the characters in special ways. Lamb concludes, "So in the reading of the play, we see with Desdemona's eyes; in the seeing of it, we are forced to look with our own."<sup>27</sup>

Lamb argues that Shakespeare's supernatural characters must fail on stage. While a reader is "spell-bound" by the witches in *Macbeth*, an audience finds them laughable: "the sight actually destroys the faith." Just as ghost stories cannot be effective in a well-lit room full of friends, dramatic ghosts cannot be believed in a crowded theater, with its glaring lights. Similarly, Lamb questions whether *The Tempest* can be performed on stage effectively. He argues, "Spirits and fairies cannot be represented, they cannot even be painted, - they can only be believed."<sup>28</sup>

Elaborate scenery is also distracting in Shakespeare's plays. "That which in [artificial] comedy, or plays of familiar life, adds so much to the life of the imitation, in plays which appeal to the higher faculties, positively destroys the illusion which it is introduced to aid." Similarly, Lamb finds the frequent costume changes of contemporary productions disconcerting. They give far too much importance to dress, which is superfluous in Shakespeare's plays. Like acting and scenery, costumes over-emphasize the most external aspects of dramatic literature. In contrast, when reading, the "better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character."<sup>29</sup>

In the final paragraph of "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," Lamb insists that he could extend his argument to prove that the playwright's comic characters "are equally incompatible with stage representation."<sup>30</sup> He never wrote such an essay, and he does praise various actors for their roles in *Twelfth Night* in "On Some of the Old Actors." However, his attack on paintings of Falstaff in "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty" indicates how he might have proceeded.

#### Conclusion

Like Iser, Fish, Slatoff, and other twentieth-century writers, Lamb considered the act of reading a creative process. He envisioned a contract

of mutual respect between authors and their public. Over and over, he insisted upon the need for both writers and readers to have imaginative freedom. Lamb felt shackled by theatrical productions of Shakespeare's plays, because they limited his imagination and distracted him with costumes, scenery, and elocution instead of exploring the protagonists' psyches.

Lamb argues that the Elizabethan playwright is unique because he arouses the imaginative "powers" of his readers.<sup>31</sup> In "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare" and other essays, Lamb tries to make his reading public receptive to the literary power of drama. He urges readers to open their minds and to participate actively in the experience of literature.

## NOTES

- 1 Jack J Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p.12; Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. x-xi; Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," *Critical Inquiry*, 7, No.1 (Autumn, 1980), p.126; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, 1972; trans. by author (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p.283.
- 2 Charles Lamb, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W Marris, Jr (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975- ), I, 271; see also Charles Lamb, "The Londoner" (1802), *The Reflector*, in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb* (7 vols), ed. E V Lucas (London: Methuen & Co., 1903-05), I, 39 (hereafter cited as *Works*); Charles Lamb, "My First Play," *Elia*, in *Works*, II, 100.
- 3 John I Ades, "Charles Lamb, Shakespeare, and Early Nineteenth-Century Theater," *PMLA*, 85, No.3 (May, 1970), 519. The passage referred to by Ades occurs in Lamb's essay, "On Some of the Old Actors," in *Works*, II, 133-34.
- 4 Lamb, "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," *The Last Essays of Elia*, in *Works*, II, 172; "XII. That Home is Home Though It is Never so Homely" from "Popular Fallacies" in the original version published in the *New Monthly Magazine*, March, 1826 - E V Lucas reproduces this passage in his notes for *The Last Essays of Elia* in *Works*, II, 458 (apparently, the passage was cancelled by Lamb when he revised the essay); "Readers Against the Grain," *The "Lepus" Papers*, in *Works*, I, 272-73. Lamb may have been influenced by Dryden's view of "mob readers" in "Dedication of the Aeneis" (1697). Here, Dryden defines "mob readers" as "such things as are our upper-gallery audience in a playhouse, who like nothing but the husk and rind of wit." See John Dryden, "Dedication of the Aeneis," in *Essays of John Dryden*, 2 vols, ed. W P Ker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), II, 223.
- 5 Lamb, *Letters*, Marris edn, I, 265-66. Despite Lamb's harsh words for Sterne here, there is some evidence that the eighteenth-century novelist shared Lamb's commitment to leaving much to the reader's imagination. Sterne writes, "... The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own."



- See Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), ed. Ian Watt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), II, Ch.11, p.83.
- 6 Stanley Eugene Fish, *Surprised by Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.x; Walter J Slatoff, *With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp.7, 37, 143, 66. The quotation cited by Slatoff is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J Shawcross, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), II, Ch.14, 11-12. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, pp.43, 56.
  - 7 Lamb, "Review of *The Excursion; A Poem*" (1814), in *Works*, I, 170. An examination of contemporary reviews reveals some specimens of the narrow-mindedness which Lamb berates. While some reviewers appreciated the originality of writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge, others, like William Roberts of *The British Review*, object to Romantic poetry because it departs from "common sense." Roberts probably speaks for a segment of the reading public when he argues that a good poet must shape his "chaotic originalities" until they "look like natives of our own minds, and easily...mix with the train of our own conceptions." See *The British Review*, August 1816, cited in J R de J Jackson, ed., *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 221-22. Clearly, such logic violates the author/reader contract by imposing too many controls on the writer's imagination.
  - 8 Lamb, "On the Genius and Character of Hogarth; With Some Remarks on a Passage in the Writings of the Late Mr. Barry" (1811), in *Works*, I, 72, 78, 74.
  - 9 Lamb, "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art," *The Last Essays of Elia*, in *Works*, II, 233. Lamb's own dramas emphasize the characters' minds, not external action. Wayne McKenna concludes, "Lamb sacrificed too much stage effect in favour of the exploration of the thoughts of his characters. He allowed them scant opportunity for action..." See Wayne McKenna, *Charles Lamb and the Theatre* (Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe Limited, 1978), p.60.
  - 10 Lamb, "Letter to Samuel Rogers," Dec. 1833, in *The Letters of Charles Lamb to which are added those of his sister Mary Lamb*, 3 vols, ed. E V Lucas (London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd and Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1935), III, 394.
  - 11 John R Nabholz comments, "...All of Lamb's Essays of the Imagination are 'dramatic' in their structure and procedure. ...They are the working out before our eyes, in the rhetoric, syntax and structure of the Essays, of the experience of imaginative liberation itself, the dissolving and dissipating of one perspective on experience, and the creation of a new perspective." See Nabholz, "Drama and Rhetoric in Lamb's Essays of the Imagination," *Studies in English Literature*, 12, No.4 (Autumn, 1972), 685.
  - 12 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation" (1811), in *Works*, I, 98. Later in "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," Lamb returns to Garrick, castigating him for his "miserable cravings after applause." The

- essayist's animosity seems excessive in these passages, and I think he loses some of the reader's sympathy. Lamb has a better point in the following paragraphs, where he scolds Garrick for interpolating inferior scenes written by Nahum Tate and Colley Cibber in the "matchless" tragedies of Shakespeare. See *Works*, I, 104, 105, 107.
- 13 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 98. Coleridge made a similar remark: "Mrs Siddons as Lady, and Kemble as Macbeth...might be the Macbeths of the Kembles, but they were not the Macbeths of Shakespeare." See Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, 2 vols, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2nd edn (London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1960), II, 230.
  - 14 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 99, 111. Lamb once sat next to a blind man at a performance of *Richard III*. The man was profoundly moved by various scenes, while the rest of the audience was distracted by the bad acting. Lamb uses this experience as evidence that the staging of Shakespearean tragedy is not desirable. See "Play-House Memoranda" (1813), in *Works*, I, 158.
  - 15 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 99. Despite Lamb's harsh words for taking passages out of context, he himself committed this literary sin in *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets* (1808).
  - 16 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 99-100. For a discussion of Lamb's use of "pictorial," see pp.27-28 above.
  - 17 Lamb's view of Hamlet is an outgrowth of late eighteenth-century descriptions of the prince as sensitive, melancholy, and intellectual. Earlier critics like Rowe, Dennis, and Addison had viewed Hamlet as manly, active, and heroic. See Paul S Conklin, *A History of Hamlet Criticism, 1601-1821* (New York: King's Crown Press-Columbia University Press, 1947), pp.9, 26, 34-52.
  - 18 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 100-01. In a later article attributed to Lamb by William Macdonald, the essayist portrays Hamlet as a man of "sensibility" who "lives in a world of imagination; his projects have little of the solid and consecutive architecture of the earth..." See "Mr Kean as *Hamlet*" (1820), in *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. William Macdonald, 12 vols (London: J M Dent & Co., 1903), III, 61 and notes on pp. 307-08. E V Lucas does not include this essay in his edition of Lamb's *Works*.
  - 19 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 101.
  - 20 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 103, 101. Lamb's reference to "the whole" of Hamlet's character recalls Maurice Morgann's contention that one must consider the "whole" character of Falstaff, rather than isolated incidents. Lamb may also have been influenced by William Richardson, who referred to "the whole character of Hamlet" to determine his motivation. See Morgann, *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777), in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Daniel A Fineman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p.162; Richardson, "Additional Observations on Shakespeare's Dramatic Character of Hamlet; in a Letter to a Friend," *Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters of Richard the Third, King Lear and Timon of Athens. To Which Are Added, an Essay on the Faults of Shakespeare; and Additional Observations on the Character of Hamlet* (London, 1784; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), p.159.

- 21 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 105-06. While Hazlitt agreed with Lamb that Shakespeare's tragedies could not benefit from staging, the younger critic exempts *Richard III* from this ban, probably because Hazlitt much admired Edmund Kean's portrayal of the King. See William Hazlitt, "Richard III.," *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P P Howe, 21 vols (London: J M Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1934), IV, 298.
- 22 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," I, 106. Coleridge also uses the term "abstract" in a similar context: "Shakespeare's characters, from Othello and Macbeth down to Dogberry and the Grave-digger, may be termed ideal realities. They are not the things themselves, so much as abstracts of the things, which a great mind takes into itself, and there naturalizes them to its own conception." See Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, II, 125.
- 23 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 106.
- 24 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 107. Lamb also identified with the characters in Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. The nineteenth-century critic remarks, "The reality and life of this Dialogue passes any scenical illusion I ever felt. I never read it but my ears tingle, and I feel a hot blush spread my cheeks, as if I were presently about to 'proclaim' some such 'malefactions' of myself, as the Brothers here rebuke in their unnatural parent..." (Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets in Works*, IV, 160, footnote # 1).
- 25 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 102 and footnote # 1 on p.102; I, 108. See pp.27-28 above for my comments on "Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art."
- 26 Lamb, I. 108; Jonas A Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), p.330; Joan Coldwell, "The Playgoer as Critic: Charles Lamb on Shakespeare's Characters," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 26, No.2 (Spring, 1975), 194. See also Ades, p.520, footnote # 19.
- 27 Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 108 and footnote # 1, p.108.
- 28 Lamb's concern about the portrayal of the supernatural was shared by some contemporary writers and stage managers. Henry James Pye points out that Shakespeare's supernatural characters lose their eeriness when portrayed in a theater: "What representation can give us such ideas of the ghost of Hamlet as we received from the terrible and pathetic dialogue between that awful phantom and his son. Perhaps the effect is stronger in the closet than on the stage. This is certainly the case with Macbeth." Pye concludes that the witches in *Macbeth* become "objects of ridicule" when they appear in a performance. See Pye, *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetic of Aristotle* (London, 1792; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1971), "Note I" on Ch.14 of the *Poetics*, pp.274-75. In 1794, John Phillip Kemble broke with tradition by eliminating Banquo's Ghost from the cast of *Macbeth*. Kemble also restored dignity to the witches, who had been presented as comic characters in other eighteenth-century productions. Kemble wanted to emphasize the witches' supernatural powers. See Dennis Bartholomeusz, *Macbeth and the Players* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp.133, 135. See Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare," in *Works*, I, 109-10.

29 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 110-11.

30 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 111.

31 Lamb, *ibid*, I, 103.

32 I would like to thank Stuart Tave and Elizabeth Helsinger for their helpful comments and advice.

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#### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTENT OF LAMB'S LETTERS (Concluded)

D C Saxena

##### Connoisseur of Food and Fellowship

Lamb was an epicurean in his tastes. As his contemporary George Daniel puts it, "mine host, though a philosopher, had no taste for Plato's diet, dates and cold water."<sup>90</sup> He grows eloquent, even dithyrambic, in discoursing on his favourite culinary preparations. A number of essays, "Christ's Hospital, Five and Thirty Years Ago," "New Year's Eve," "Imperfect Sympathies," "Grace Before Meat," besides the celebrated "Dissertation Upon Roast Pig," are avowals of Lamb's partiality for the "delicious juices of meats and fishes,"<sup>91</sup> of which the letters provide corroboration.

Here is what he writes to Manning:

Foh! how beautiful and strong those buttered onions come to my nose! For you must know we extract a divine spirit of gravy from those materials which, duly compounded with a consistence of bread and cream ...do mutually illustrate and set off (as skilful goldfoils to rare jewels) your partridge, pheasant, woodcock, snipe, teal, widgeon, and the other lesser daughters of the ark.<sup>92</sup>

In another letter to Manning he clarifies that "My single affection is not so singly wedded to snipes; but the curious and epicurean eye would also take a pleasure in beholding a delicate and well-chosen assortment of teals, ortolans, the unctuous and palate-soothing flesh of geese wild and tame, nightingales' brains, the sensorium of a young sucking-pig, or any other Christmas dish, which I leave to the judgment of you and the cook of Gonville."<sup>93</sup> Confiding that "Richard knew my blind side when he pitched upon brawn," he maintains that "not every common gullet fancier can properly esteem it,"<sup>94</sup> implying that as a "gullet fancier" he is in a class by himself.

Lamb professes to love Charles Chambers for his "noble attachment to the fat unctuous juice of deer's flesh & the green unspeakable of turtle," but advises him that "A true son of Epicurus should reserve one taste peculiar to himself," so that he can be "the only worthy depository" of a secret which Lamb proposes to impart to him: "It is a little square bit... in or near the knuckle bone of a fried joint of...fat I can't call it nor lean neither altogether, it is that beautiful compound which Nature must have made in Paradise, Park venison... Adam ate them entire & inseparate, and this little taste of Eden in the knuckle bone of a fried...seems the only relique of a Paradaisical state."<sup>95</sup>

Lamb informs Barron Field that "We have eaten frogs. It has been such a treat! ...Frogs are the nicest little delicate things - rabbitly-flavoured. Imagine a Lilliputian rabbit! They fricassee them; but in my mind, drest

seethed, plain, with parsley and butter, would have been the decision of Apicius."<sup>96</sup> Presenting Mrs Godwin with a piece of dried salmon, "the best that swims in Trent," because "Mr. Godwin is a little fastidious in what he eats for supper," Lamb gives a few hints on its preparation: "If you do not know how to dress it, allow me to add that it should be cut in thin slices and boiled in paper *previously prepared in butter*."<sup>97</sup> Lamb warmly appreciates presents of provender from his friends. The cheese sent by Thomas Allsop is pronounced the "delicatest rain-bow-hued melting piece I ever flavoured."<sup>98</sup> Acknowledging John Rickman's gift he says, "Your goose found her way into our Larder with infinite discretion. Judging by her Giblets which we have sacrificed first, she is a most sensible Bird."<sup>99</sup>

Lamb reserves his keenest ardours for pig's flesh. Thanking Thomas Robinson for "the best pig, which myself, the warmest of pig-lovers, ever tasted," he refrains from dilating on the "crackling - done to a turn," for fear that "Mrs. Clarkson, who, I hear, is with you, will set me down as an Epicure."<sup>100</sup> To Henry Dodwell he writes:

Your little pig found his way to Enfield this morning without his feet, or rather his little feet came first... It was a pity to kill him, or *rather* as Rice would say, it would have been a pity not to kill him in his state of innocence... Your kind letter has left a relish upon my taste; it read warm and short as tomorrow's crackling.<sup>101</sup>

Therefore, John Kenyon was not wrong in publishing the following lines "to Lamb with a tributary hamper:"

Elia! Thro' irony of hearts the mender,  
May this pig prove like thine own pathos - tender;  
Bear of thy sageness, in its sage the zest;  
And quaintly cackle, like the crackling jest;  
Be worthy thee - as thou art worthy it.

Lamb's fascination for gastronomy finds piquant expression in a letter to Joseph Hume! "I always spell plumb-pudding with a *b*, *p-l-u-m-b* - I think it reads fatter and more suetty."<sup>102</sup>

However, Lamb was no glutton, even if he occasionally gives this impression by gustatory outbursts like, "God bless me, here are the birds, smoking hot! all that is gross and unspiritual in me rises at the sight."<sup>103</sup> He was a "small eater," with the gourmet's typical fastidiousness. In his article on "Eating and Drinking in Lamb's Elia Essays,"<sup>104</sup> F V Randel attributes Lamb's love of food to the lack of maternal love: "... 'mother' and 'feeder' were linked ideas for Lamb, and if the one notion had to be suppressed, he clung the more tenaciously to the other, though shifting his emphasis to ingesting rather than being fed." There is not a shred of evidence in the letters to support this ingenious theory, because, as stated earlier, Lamb was always "temperate in his meals."<sup>105</sup> The trend towards such psychological speculations in modern criticism is as vain as the attempts to analyse the perfumes of flowers. Whatever the reason for Lamb's gastronomic fervour, he indubitably made it serve his art remarkably well, to the eternal delight of all Elians.

Lamb's partiality for "good English mirth and heart's ease"<sup>106</sup> gave him an unusual aptitude for friendship. R S Knox perceptively observes: "Not in nature, as was the fashion of the moment, but in 'the old arms of humanity' he found his solace."<sup>107</sup> The reason was that Lamb considered it "the privilege of friendship to talk nonsense and to have her nonsense

respected."<sup>108</sup> To Manning he wrote that "One glimpse of the human face, and shake of the human hand, is better than whole reams of...cold, thin correspondence..."<sup>109</sup>

Persons of the most disparate nature, indeed many who in a different setting would have been at each other's throat, were his friends. In the Preface to the *Last Essays* Lamb admitted choosing his companions "for some individuality of character" - a point which he elaborated in the letter dated 20th March, 1822, to Wordsworth:

Common natures do not suffice me... I want individuals. I am made up of queer points and I want so many answering needles.<sup>110</sup>

His Wednesday evenings, where "the champagne was in the talk,"<sup>111</sup> drew the gentle Dyer, the mathematical Manning, the vivacious Leigh Hunt, the irascible Hazlitt, the ceaselessly-prattling Coleridge, the dour Wordsworth, the audacious Godwin and the prudent Southey - to name a few of the distinguished galaxy of Lamb's 'intimados.' The star of these gatherings was, in Southey's words, -

Charles Lamb, to those who know thee justly dear  
For rarest genius, for sterling worth,  
Unchanging friendship, warmth of heart sincere,  
And wit that never gave an ill thought birth.

A perusal of the letters proves that for Lamb places are hallowed by their association with friends. Thus, he tells Wordsworth: "Separate from the pleasure of your company I don't care much if I never see a mountain in my life."<sup>112</sup> Recalling to Coleridge "the little smoky room at the Salutation & Cat, where we have sat together thro' the winter nights, beguiling the cares of life with poesy,"<sup>113</sup> he expresses fervent desire to return to the Salutation Scenery. In two other letters to Coleridge, who is "alike a sharer" in "my sober and my half-tipsy hours,"<sup>114</sup> he chews the cud of memory of that "nice little smoky room at the Salutation, which is even now continually presenting itself to my recollection, with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, Egghot, welch Rabbits, metaphysics and Poetry."<sup>115</sup> He adjures Coleridge to continue to be his correspondent, so that he does not fancy that the world is all barrenness. Resenting Coleridge's remissness in this matter, Lamb says:

do what you will, Col., you may hurt me and vex me by your silence, but you cannot estrange my heart from you all. I cannot scatter friendship(s) like chuck-farthings, nor let them drop from mine hand like hour-glass sand.<sup>116</sup>

Other letters also amply prove Lamb's emotional attachment to Coleridge, e.g., - "you dwell in my heart of hearts, and I love you in all the naked honesty of prose."<sup>117</sup> This is what he writes in an earlier letter: "Make it, I entreat you, one of your puny comforts, that I feel for you, and share all your griefs with you."<sup>118</sup> Giving credit to Coleridge for rescuing him "from the polluting spirit of the world,"<sup>119</sup> Lamb expresses undying gratitude to him.

This relationship does not remain undarkened by differences. Lloyd, Coleridge's former protégé, causes a virtual separation between Lamb and Coleridge by reporting Coleridge's supposed remark: "Poor Lamb, if he wants any *knowledge*, he may apply to me." In a fit of petulance, Lamb asks his "Learned Sir, my Friend"<sup>120</sup> to answer his *Theses Quaedam Theologicae*. But Lamb is not one to nurse resentments for long:

If you ever thought an offence, much more wrote it, against me, it must have been in the times of Noah; and the great waters, swept it away.<sup>121</sup>

Likewise, he patches up with Southey, observing, "That accursed 'Quarterly Review' had vexed me by a gratuitous speaking, of its own knowledge, that the 'Confessions of a Drunkard' was a genuine description of the state of the writer. Little things, that are not ill meant, may produce much ill... I shall be ashamed to see you, and my sister (though innocent) will be still more so; for the folly was done without her knowledge, and has made her uneasy ever since."<sup>122</sup> As he confides to John Taylor, he is "too thankful indeed for certain relationships lent him here, not to tremble for a possible resumption of the gift."<sup>123</sup> Verily, Lamb "counts over his friends in public, like a child counting over his toys."<sup>124</sup>

Godwin, to many insufferable, was always welcome at Lamb's:

seven times in a day shalt thou batter at my peace, and if I shut aught against thee, save the Temple of Janus, may Briareus, with his hundred hands, in each a brass knocker, lead me such a life.<sup>125</sup>

To Dibdin, who is in the dumps, he writes a letter with the hope that "If any of the little topics of mirth I have thought upon should serve you in this utter extinguishment of sunshine, to make you a little merry, I shall have had my ends."<sup>126</sup>

However, Lamb resents unwanted intrusion into his privacy by strangers. In a mood of disgust at the "heavy importation of two old ladies," he complains to Barton:

Whither can I take wing from the oppression of human faces? Would I were in a wilderness of Apes, tossing cocoa nuts about, grinning and grinned at!<sup>127</sup>

But for friends, his doors are always wide open, as is his heart. According to George Daniel, Lamb once said that "The house of Socrates, though small, would hold all his friends, and this is quite big enough to hold all mine."<sup>128</sup> As we have seen, the letters demonstrate not only that he valued friendships, but that he thrived on friendships. Hood, one of Lamb's 'intimados' had ample reasons for remarking that "as long as Humanity endures and man owns fellowship with man, the spirit of Charles Lamb will still be extant."<sup>129</sup>

#### Humanity & Humility

We have it on the testimony of De Quincey that Lamb was one of the most humble and unpretentious of human beings. At the same time, he was most indulgent to others, manifesting, at times, almost a Christ-like attitude of forgiveness.

In a letter to B W Procter<sup>130</sup>, Lamb relates how he urged a lady, Miss Ouldfield, who would have abandoned a wretched family on finding that the father had been convicted of theft, not to discontinue her charity, as, "I have delicacy for a sheep-stealer." On another occasion, he upbraids Wordsworth for joining in denouncing a libertine: "Pretty fellows we are to abuse him on that score, when every one of us, on going out into the Strand, will make up to the first pretty girl he sees."<sup>131</sup>

Lamb manifests sympathy for the outcast and the oppressed, "entering like a brother into the home of the very poor." His kindness "embraces mankind

...with an individual caress."<sup>132</sup> Recommending for employment an impecunious person to Southey he says: "This poor fellow (whom I know just enough to vouch for his strict integrity & worth) has lost two or three employments from illness, which he cannot regain; he was once insane, & from the distressful uncertainty of his livelihood has reason to apprehend a return of that malady... For God's sake Southey, if it does not go against you to ask favors, do it now - ask it as for me..."<sup>133</sup> He intercedes on behalf of one Miss Ibbs with both Fanny Kelly and Richard Peake. To Miss Kelly he writes: "Is it in your power to speak a good word for her at the Theatre? It would be a great benefit for the poor girl, and very much bind us to gratitude, if you only tried to do it."<sup>134</sup> Richard Peake is told that "it would be of the greatest consequence to her poor finances, having a mother (as what poor Chorister has not?) to keep, if she could be admitted on your list for the ensuing season."<sup>135</sup> Basil Montagu is requested to "think of poor Tom Holcroft (son of Lamb's friend), who is entirely out of employ & thrown upon the wide Town, with nothing to do."<sup>136</sup> Failing in this endeavour, it is worth recalling, that Lamb raised money to send him out to India.

Nor were individuals alone the beneficiaries of his humanitarian zeal. His letter to James Gillman records the exertions made by him in "defence of druggets and long camblets,"<sup>137</sup> (i.e. the weavers of Norwich). The *New Monthly Magazine* for 1826 acknowledges that "Great merit is due to Mr. Lamb junior for his exertions to relieve the weavers of Norwich." Lamb believes that "to be duped by a score of begging impostors out of a few paltry pence is not half as bad as denying one deserving applicant."<sup>138</sup>

Still, Lamb rates himself poorly, as humility "best becometh the Christian character. God, in the New Testament (*our best guide*), is represented to us in the kind, condescending, amiable, familiar light of a *parent*: and in my poor mind 'tis best for us so to consider of Him...without indulging too bold conceptions of His nature."<sup>139</sup> Mark his modest opinion of his abilities as a prosewriter: "My poor prose, which is near exhausted, is the London's, and my dry spring is not likely to overflow to a second reservoir."<sup>140</sup> His general reputation as a good man is of little significance to Lamb: "How cheap that character is acquired! ... I know things (thoughts or things - thoughts are things) of myself which would make every friend I have fly me as a plague patient."<sup>141</sup> All that Lamb concedes is his "squeamishness to anything that remotely looks like a falsehood,"<sup>142</sup> which had earned him the sobriquets "Old Honesty," "Upright Telltruth, Esq."

In "Lines to the Memory of Charles Lamb," H F Cary compared his expansive generosity to Philip Sidney's:

Thou too, like Sidney, wouldst have given  
The water, thirsting and near heaven;  
Nay were it wine, fill'd to the brim;  
Thou hadst look'd hard, but given like him.

Lamb himself would have spurned such tributes, for he regarded "Monuments to goodness, even after death" as equivocal, because, as he beautifully put it, "Goodness blows no trumpet, nor desires to have it blown."<sup>143</sup>

#### NOTES

90 George Daniel, *Recollections of Charles Lamb*, p.20.



- 91 W Macdonald (ed.), *Works of Charles Lamb*, Vol.I, p.58.
- 92 Lucas, *Letters*, I, p.214.
- 93 Ibid., 238.
- 94 Ibid., 386.
- 95 Lucas, *Letters*, II, 212-13.
- 96 Ibid., 333.
- 97 Ibid., III, 106.
- 98 Ibid., I, 418.
- 99 Ibid., II, 397.
- 100 Lucas, *Letters*, II, 345.
- 101 Ibid., III, 140.
- 102 Ibid., II, 41.
- 103 Ibid., I, 216.
- 104 F V Randel, "Eating & Drinking in Lamb's Elia Essays," *ELH*, March 1970, p.61.
- 105 W Macdonald, *The Works*, Vol.2, p.3.
- 106 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 165.
- 107 R S Knox, "Charles Lamb," *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly*, Oct. 1934, p.77.
- 108 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 102.
- 109 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 200.
- 110 Ibid., II, 319.
- 111 G H Lewes, "Charles Lamb - His Genius and Writings," *British Quarterly Review*, 1848, Reprinted in Special Supplement to *Bulletin* No.169 of Charles Lamb Society, Jan. 1963.
- 112 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 241.
- 113 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 17.
- 114 Ibid., 30.
- 115 Ibid., 60.
- 116 Ibid., 103.
- 117 Ibid., 90.
- 118 Ibid., 54.
- 119 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 118.
- 120 Ibid., 123.
- 121 Ibid., III, 334.
- 122 Ibid., II, 407.
- 123 Ibid., II, 301.
- 124 A Symons, "Charles Lamb," *Monthly Review*, Nov. 1905, p.53.
- 125 Lucas, *Letters*, II, 114.
- 126 Ibid., III, 59.
- 127 Ibid., 117.
- 128 George Daniel, *Recollections of Charles Lamb*, p.22.
- 129 Thomas Hood, *Letters*, II, 390.
- 130 Lucas, *Letters*, III, 207.
- 131 "Charles Lamb & His Biographers," *North American Review*, April 1867, p.423.
- 132 A Symons, "Charles Lamb," *Monthly Review*, Nov. 1905, p.52.
- 133 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 144.
- 134 Ibid., III, 118.
- 135 Ibid., 119.
- 136 Ibid., II, 257.
- 137 Lucas, *Letters*, III, 251.
- 138 George Daniel, *Recollections of C. Lamb*, p.44.
- 139 Lucas, *Letters*, I, 49.
- 140 Ibid., II, 449.

141 Ibid., 418-19.

142 Ibid., 231.

143 Lucas, *Letters*, III, 101.

NB: All references are to the Lucas edition of the letters, unless stated otherwise.

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## THE REAL BROTHER OF JOHN SCOTT

Patrick O'Leary

In his novel *So Perish the Roses* Neil Bell introduced a brother of John Scott, Captain George Scott of the Dragoons. He was depicted skating with Fanny Kelly on the frozen Thames, and encountering Charles and Mary Lamb at Covent Garden. The captain, like much else in the book, was fictitious, but John Scott did have a brother who may well have met Lamb.

Alexander Dick Scott was born in Aberdeen, in 1801 seventeen years after John. Although twice desperately ill as a child he lived to be 69. During 1819 and 1820, when his brother was launching *The London Magazine*, Alexander was in London learning the upholstery trade so that he could assist their widowed mother to carry on the family business. He returned to Aberdeen in May 1820. However the concern did not prosper and after a few years Alexander went to work for another firm. He ended his days in Edinburgh.

An anonymous obituarist in *The Aberdeen Herald* of 17 December 1870 wrote of Alexander Dick Scott: 'He had previously been acquainted with many eminent literary characters, who were accustomed to meet at his brother's house. Charles Lamb and several others, contributors to the "London Magazine", and, among the rest, the infamous Wainewright, the poisoner, who, by his plausibilities, had deceived "the frolic and gentle" Elia by whom he is described as the genial and light-hearted Janus Weathercock - the *nom de plume* he had assumed in the Magazine. At this time Mr Scott seems to have contemplated devoting himself to literary pursuits, but it was perhaps fortunate that he abandoned this design, as his over-sensitive and nervous temperament would have unfitted him alike for the duties of editor or contributor to the magazines or newspapers of the day. He was more in his element when he returned to Aberdeen, and was confidentially employed in the counting house of Messrs Alexander Hadden & Sons, where he had leisure after office hours, like his friend, Charles Lamb, to study his favourite books and enjoy himself in bookish society.' The writer went on to say Alexander joined with other Aberdonians, mostly professors and ministers, in a club that met regularly to read and discuss their own work: 'Mr Scott's essays for the club were carefully prepared and principally consisted of short papers on Art, and what has been termed the minor morals, in a style not dissimilar to the Essays of Elia, or the light and playful speculations of Leigh Hunt...it is not unlikely his executors may find among his papers fragments of more than common interest and worthy of being preserved.'

Alexander does not seem to have left a will, and I have not been able to trace any Elia-style essays. But some family papers did survive and are now in the National Library of Scotland. They were collected by Dr John Brown, author of *Rab and his Friends*, who married Kitty McKay, beautiful niece of

the Scott brothers. Alexander was mentioned in the doctor's correspondence, and was evidently a great favourite with the Browns' own children. The suggestion that Alexander met Lamb 'at his brother's house' must be regarded with caution. When Alexander left London in 1820 Lamb had not begun his essays for the magazine. John Scott and Lamb had several mutual friends - among them Hazlitt, Benjamin Robert Haydon and Wordsworth - and the essayist wrote several jaunty letters to his editor. But they were primarily business letters, and there seems to be no record of social intimacy between the two men. However I have seen a letter to Alexander from Francesca Colnaghi, his brother's sister-in-law, which indicates that the younger Scott visited London again in 1822. By that time John was dead, but his widow and Francesca were the daughters of printseller Paul Colnaghi, whose premises were known to Lamb. Perhaps it was there that Alexander Dick Scott met Elia. Francesca was about Alexander's own age, and to judge from the shy raillery of her letter, more than a little in love with him. The letter, with others, were preserved by descendants of her brother, Dominic Colnaghi, but I do not know its present location.

*The Aberdeen Herald* obituarist was writing nearly 50 years after these events, and probably exaggerating what he half remembered hearing. But he portrayed Alexander Dick as self-effacing and well-principled, not the sort of man to boast of knowing Lamb if he did not.

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#### BOOK REVIEWS

Winifred F Courtney: *Young Charles Lamb, 1775-1802*. London: Constable £25; New York: New York University Press, 1982, \$18.

Members of the Charles Lamb Society will welcome this contribution to Lamb bibliography by one of their own members, a frequent contributor to the *Bulletin*. Mrs Courtney points out in her Introduction that her book is not intended to supersede E V Lucas's *Life* as the definitive biography - or to serve as "even Volume I" of such a project. Nonetheless she has approached her task seriously, as is apparent in her acknowledgments, her bibliography, and her notes, many of them thrashing out fine points of dating, authorship, and the like. Obviously she has immersed herself in the period, not only mining Lamb's letters and his published works for information but investigating, more than earlier biographers, the lives and characters of his many associates. She presents her findings in a lively conversational style, clearly enjoying the process and sharing her enthusiasm with the reader. On occasion she draws on her imagination, as when she describes John Lamb Senior's funeral, basing her speculations on known facts. But she takes pains to signal her reader, by means of a "may have" or "must have", when she departs from documented evidence.

The book offers no major addition to our knowledge of Lamb, but it contains some new and helpful features, such as the prefatory genealogical tables of Lamb's family and the Plumers of Blakesware as well as a professional psychiatrist's diagnosis of the possible causes and effects of Lamb's stammer. Mrs Courtney also introduces new information about the careers of some of Lamb's friends - notably Thomas Manning - and has examined the manuscript of William Godwin's diary, now on indefinite loan to the Bodleian Library by the owner, Lord Abinger. Unfortunately it is only a skeletal

diary listing, without subjective comment, the people Godwin has encountered on any given day, yet it serves to record how Lamb spent many of his leisure hours and how his friendship with Godwin fluctuated over the years.

Mrs Courtney's most notable contribution to our knowledge of Lamb as author is her discussion of his work for the long-lost *Albion* during the editorship of John Fenwick (immortalized as Ralph Bigod in "The Two Races of Men"). This will come as no revelation to *Bulletin* readers, who have already seen her fuller discussion of the subject in the issues of January, April, and October, 1977. She naturally makes use of this material to counter the usual claim (advanced even by Lamb himself) that he was "apolitical." As she acknowledges, he "did not care about day-to-day politics" (p.201), but he could take a strong stand when obliged to do so during his occasional forays into journalism or when his humanitarian nature recoiled at instances of dishonesty or cruelty.

Mrs Courtney departs again from generally accepted interpretations of Lamb's life and character in her treatment of his affection for Ann Simmons. She refuses to dismiss it as a pose, a case of "puppy love" or a manifestation of the "in love with love" syndrome. Simply by assembling all Lamb's many references to "Anna" or "Alice" in his later poems and essays she presents a formidable argument. Surprisingly, however, although she twice alludes to Southey's report of Lamb's callous remarks about Ann after her marriage, she does not attempt to reconcile his apparent bitterness with her theory - though it could be variously explained: as protective reticence, jealousy, or embarrassment, for example.

It would be superfluous to provide for *Bulletin* readers the sort of summary that reviewers of biographies customarily supply. Dedicated Elians may well find Mrs Courtney's book most valuable and interesting because of what they learn of Lamb's contemporaries and his era. Her book is not so much a close study of his development as man and writer as it is a broad view, a sort of "Charles Lamb and His Times" or "Charles Lamb and His Friends." When a character like Coleridge or Godwin or Manning appears on the scene, the author does not hesitate to insert a digression of several pages outlining his entire career, not confining herself to those details that bear directly on his relationship with Lamb. She obviously enjoys collecting and displaying eccentrics, enlivening her sketches of them with anecdotal material. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and it serves to relieve some of the more lugubrious passages of Lamb's life. (One of the problems any biographer of Lamb must face is that his life contrasts so sharply with his writing!) For anyone seeking information about Lamb's own development, however, these incidental excursions from the main issue might prove distracting or confusing.

The same is true of Mrs Courtney's surveys of various aspects of the social background of the period: they seem at times to be an end in themselves rather than a means to the end of clarifying Lamb's thought and actions. Her sixteenth chapter, "Political Lamb," tells a good deal about contemporary politics in general, relatively little about Lamb's own thinking on the subject. In her fifteenth chapter, "The Quaker Lloyds," the reader learns much about the development of Quakerism and more than seems relevant about the eleven Lloyd children of Birmingham, their forebears, their marriages, and their offspring. In the process the influence that Charles and Robert Lloyd may have had on Lamb is slighted. Elsewhere other

seminal relationships - with men like Coleridge or Godwin or Manning - seem hardly to be traced as fully as one would wish.

In addition, four sections of the book are headed "*The Times*" and printed as separate chapters, though not assigned chapter numbers. One of them, sub-titled "No Popery, 1780," outlines the Gordon Riots, which took place when Lamb was five years old. Two pages earlier the reader has been told: "Charles's only reference to [the Riots] is remote and impersonal, as if he had not experienced or heard much about them. One need not speculate further: they occurred, and had an impact on the entire nation" (p.27).

But it is doubtless unfair to criticize a historically oriented biography because it is not the psychologically and/or critically oriented type of study the reviewer happens to prefer. For most CLS members the major fault of the book will be not that it covers too broad an area but that it ends too soon - a good two decades before the emergence of Elia. The last sentence in the book - "But that is another story" - suggests that there may be more to come. In the meantime admirers of Lamb will be delighted to find that two presses, a commercial firm in England and a university affiliate in the United States, have, in effect, challenged the tiresome canard that Lamb fails to speak to twentieth century readers. Apparently these two publishing houses believe they can locate buyers for a book of 400-plus pages treating less than half Lamb's life, a book brought out in a handsome format with several "new" illustrations and a dust jacket sporting a full-color reproduction of Hazlitt's portrait of Lamb. It is well worth preserving because it catches the earnestness and sensitivity of Charles Lamb as no black-and-white reproduction (like that used as the frontispiece of the book) could ever do. Lamb himself, modest as he was - and disdainful of stylish dress and elegantly bound volumes - would be obliged to admit that he is holding up very well for a man of his years.

Ralph M Wardle

Elkin Calhoun Wilson, *Santayana and Keats*. Birmingham, Alabama: Commercial Printing Co., 1980. pp.42.

What John Keats and George Santayana have in common, most conspicuously, is the fact that both of them died and are buried in Rome. It seems to have been this link that led Professor Wilson to explore other similarities between the English poet and the Spanish-American philosopher, two writers he obviously admires greatly. The results of his investigation are embodied in this reverent tribute, presented in the modest hope that observing the affinities between "the philosophic poet and the poetic philosopher" may increase understanding and appreciation of both of them.

Some of the affinities strike one immediately. Will Durant called Santayana "a poet first, and a philosopher afterwards," maintaining that "not since Plato had philosophy phrased itself so beautifully." It was as much the elegance of Santayana's style as the quality of his thought that made him such a popular writer during the first half of this century. Wilson doesn't press the question of stylistic influence, although Santayana read and admired the poet from his youth, and his prose is characterized by a richness of imagery and figurative language that reminds one of Keats. But there are in the philosopher's work sufficient echoes of insights expressed earlier by Keats to allow the assertion that Santayana brought to explicit formulation certain philosophic attitudes that are implicit in Keats's verse.

The poet and the philosopher shared a set of ontological attitudes that Wilson describes as "poetic naturalism" - "a belief that nature is the ground of all we know or can know, and that transcendence of impersonal natural process is possible for the contemplative human spirit exercising its imagination." Imagination was as central in Santayana's understanding of reality as it was in Keats's. Wilson's sense of the general intellectual kinship between the two men encourages him to look for more specific resemblances in idea and language. He makes a great deal, for instance, of Keats's fondness for Santayana's key word "essence." There is even some analysis of Keats's poetry using Santayana's terminology, following the lead the philosopher himself provided in a 1930 letter to John Middleton Murry, in which he attempted to translate into more disciplined philosophical language the Beauty-Truth equation that concludes "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Wilson also touches on other specific likenesses between the two men: their love for classical Greek culture, their fascination with dream and reverie, their lively senses of humor, etc. Finally, they seem to him to be alike in the sort of moral example they offer to us: "Both Keats and Santayana in their spiritual lives devoted to the unselfish pursuit of truth and beauty rebuke the crass materialism of our times...They are moral men, complementary guides to rational life."

One is reluctant to look for flaws in an essay that has no critical axe to grind and comes to us as a labor of love for two estimable writers. Measured by its own intentions the essay is quite successful: the comparison between Santayana and Keats is thought-provoking and illuminating. Those who know Keats well may quarrel with some of the emphases and interpretations, and, if they admire Keats more than they do Santayana, may find themselves teased at times by Wilson's apparent preference in the other direction. He has long been an admirer of Santayana, as his book on Shakespeare's comedies reveals, and he certainly seems more comfortably knowledgeable about the philosopher than he is about Keats (his judgments on the poet tend to be offered in the form of quotations from dependable scholars like Bate, Perkins, and Sperry). At any rate it does seem that his comparisons, when not perfectly balanced, tend to flatter the philosopher. More than once I thought I detected a suggestion that if Keats had lived to be 89 he might have become as wise and articulate as Santayana, perhaps even achieving his "mastery of the spiritual life." Wilson finds Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne "sad reading indeed, particularly when put beside the sonnets of Santayana in which love 'ceased to be a passion and became the energy of contemplation.'" Wilson even seems at one point to be congratulating Santayana on the serenity of his death, as contrasted with the bewildered misery of Keats's.

Conscious of the poet's youth and imperfect detachment from human passion, one might nevertheless be tempted to argue that at age 23 Keats was a more serious man than Santayana was at thrice that age. He may also have been a happier one, despite his poverty and poor health. Wilson thinks the two writers are alike in their "disinterested interest in life." But Keats's "disinterestedness" was not the aloofness of the other man. More than one critic has found something faintly repellent in Santayana's fastidious withdrawal from the human tangle. His social isolation contrasts strikingly with Keats's energetic participation in the pleasures and excesses of Regency life. It may be high praise to say that Keats resembles Santayana, but a more appropriate and suggestive comparison is the one Matthew Arnold chose for his own assessment of Keats: "He is with Shakespeare." To say "he is with Santayana" is a far smaller wreath, however artfully woven and generously offered.

Robert M Ryan (Rutgers University)

## OBITUARY

David Muspratt, who had been a member of The Society since 1972, died suddenly in September 1982. We shall all miss his presence at our monthly lectures which he attended most regularly and from which he derived much pleasure. Our sympathy is extended to his wife Vera and his family. MH

## REMEMBERING MR SWINNERTON

For many years I have cherished a warm regard for Mr Frank Swinnerton. It began as long ago as 1964, when disaster threatened the Charles Lamb Luncheon. The advertised speaker Sir Albert Richardson died a few days before the event, and Mr Crowsley was laid low with an attack of influenza. To our rescue came Mr Swinnerton as the Guest of Honour. His Toast should be reprinted in the *Bulletin*. It is difficult to pick out passages because it is all so interesting, dealing as it does with various editors of Lamb's works known personally to the speaker, names such as William MacDonald, J M Dent, and E V Lucas. We should certainly agree with his final words "Charles Lamb has something to tell us today; he is still a living voice, and still capable of inspiring us to get the best out of the books we read".

After the death of Mr Crowsley I continued his pleasant habit of sending a birthday card to certain elderly members of the Society. I never imagined that I should get such pleasure in remembering Mr Swinnerton's birthday, but each year I received a letter of thanks written in his minute hand writing, not only thanking me for the card but passing on little bits of information about himself. I looked forward with eagerness to the envelope with his writing on it. But last year the letter did not arrive, and I knew he must be very ill. I had put a question to him regarding a character in one of his novels. How did he know that anyone christened Florence, would be called Florrie at school, Flo at home, and Florence when she grew up? Alas - I shall never know. But it was so with me!

Florence Reeves

## THE CHARLES LAMB BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON

Our celebration of Lamb's birthday, on 12th February this year, took place at Frederick's, Camden Passage, just round the corner from Colebrook Cottage. It was a delightful setting in a kind of conservatory with climbing plants within and a green garden visible without. After a sumptuous meal, our President, Professor Stevens, introduced his colleague and our guest of honour, Mrs Gillian Beer, who with great charm proposed the toast, including in it the name of Mary Lamb as appropriate to the tenor of her talk, which we hope to print in the next *Bulletin*. Mr A D G Cheyne, to whom we owed the discovery of our new venue, proposed the toast to Provincial and Overseas Members and Guests and Miss Molly Lefebure replied with a pretty wit and conveyed kindly messages from Mr and Mrs Richard Wordsworth, good friends of the Society at that moment snowed up in their Cumbrian fastnesses. As Professor Stevens pointed out, quotations from Lamb himself can never be resisted in our company and were not lacking from this day's proceedings. In the absence abroad of our Chairman, our Vice-Chairman, Mr Frank Ledwith thanked Professor Stevens for so kindly presiding over this, our special occasion, once again. We were particularly happy to have with us too Mrs Stevens and Dr John Beer.

It was pleasing to welcome, according to custom, both girls and boys from Christ's Hospital and Grace Before and After Meat were spoken this year by Alastair Cadden and Mark Fieldsend, Grecians of Christ's Hospital, Horsham.

We would wish also to pay tribute to the quiet worker behind the scenes, or whom all the burden of making the arrangements falls, Mrs Madeline Huxstep, without whom this pleasurable occasion could not take place.

## NEWS

## BUTTON SNAP

Miss Reeves draws our attention to *Amateur Gardening*, week ending 6 November, 1982, in which is featured a delightfully illustrated article on the garden created by our tenant, Mrs June Tickle, at Button Snap. A number of us saw it with admiration on our Summer Visit there a couple of years ago and appreciated, as this article does, the hard work, sensitivity and taste which Mrs Tickle puts into it.

## CONGRATULATIONS

...to Mr and Mrs Frank Ledwith on the celebration of their Golden Wedding.

## CHARLES LAMB'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION LUNCHEON (FUTURE PLANS)

Perhaps Charles Lamb (like the Queen) should have an "official" birthday at a more clement season than 10th February. In spite of our Michelin-recommended venue and tickets (including wine) which represented a reduction on 1982 prices, we only attracted 52 guests this year (including five from Marymount, eight "official" guests and 10 members' guests) - a mere 29 members and their spouses, a minute proportion of our total membership. In the July *Bulletin* we shall be seeking members' views on how / when / where / if we should celebrate Charles Lamb's Birthday. Will the "silent majority" please respond.

M R Huxstep

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Charles Lamb Society will take place on Saturday, 7 May, 1983, at the Mary Ward Centre, 42/3 Queen Square, London WC1, beginning at 2.45. Nominations are invited for the vacancies on the Council arising from those members retiring in accordance with the Society's rules. Nominations should be sent to the Hon. Secretary as soon as possible, after ensuring that the nominees are prepared to stand.

## NEW MEMBERS

Dr J H Alexander, Aberdeen, on behalf of Abstracts of English Studies,  
The University of Calgary, Canada  
Professor R W Clancey, John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio, 44118, USA  
Dr Wendy Craik, Dunbar Hall, Don Street, Old Aberdeen, AB9 2UA  
Mrs D A Cranswick, 21 Colville Street, Battery Point, Tasmania 7000  
Dr P Laver, Sykeside, Townend, Grasmere, Cumbria LA22 9SG  
Miss G Mann, 15 Lamb Bank, West Malvern, Worcs WR14 4NE  
Miss E Pepper, 39 St Agnes Place, Kennington, London SE11 4BB  
Mr N Roe, The Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern  
Ireland  
Mr T Sugino, Doshisha University, Dept of English, Shinmachi-Imadegawa-  
Agaru, Kamikyo-Ku, Kyoto 602, Japan