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THE PLEASURES OF EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT: The Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*

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During my more than thirty years of teaching elementary children, I have found one of the most exciting and intellectually challenging experiences to be the introducing of the wonders of Shakespeare to my academically talented children by the way of the unique contribution made by Charles and Mary Lamb to an impressive corpus of literature written expressly for children. In recent years as I have developed and revised my teaching unit in this area, I have learned that I must first ascertain what the children already know. Consequently, in my initial talk with my fourth graders about Shakespeare and Lamb, I first ask them to share what they know about Shakespeare. They always know that he was a playwright, and one or two usually know that he is the author of such plays as *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. I explain to them that he did not consider himself a great writer of classical literature. Instead, he was intent on writing plays that would please the public and get people to buy tickets to see his plays performed.

Then I tell the children about Charles and Mary Lamb who lived roughly two hundred years after Shakespeare. I explain that during the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, Shakespeare's reputation had waned unfairly and that other writers had felt that they could improve upon his talents. Charles Lamb, however, loved Shakespeare's writing, and early in the nineteenth century Lamb began to write critical articles in which he said that the world needs to rethink its attitude toward Shakespeare. He felt that people

should read Shakespeare and decide for themselves the merits of his work as a dramatic genius whose extraordinary gifts had languished in an era of what some would see as one of dramatic inferiority. Gradually Lamb's articles had a positive impact on the reading public, and eventually he and his sister Mary decided that they would like to write the plays in story form for children to introduce them to Shakespeare. In the Lambs' preface they state their hopes and their desires far better than we can do:

What these Tales shall have been to the *young* readers, that and much more it is the writers' wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years--enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full. (1)

I stress that the Lambs never intended their stories to take the place of reading Shakespeare himself and that I share the Lambs' concern. I also tell them that Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* first appeared in 1807 and since then has never once been out of print.

After giving the children this brief but necessary background, I read *The Tempest* to them. To this first play they are receptive, but easily confused by the characters whose names are strange to them. Indeed, because I have learned how utterly confusing the names and relationships of Shakespeare's characters can be for the children, I attempt to avert this problem by giving each child a copy of the cast for each play. They quickly grasp the significance of the isolation of the island, the usefulness of the tempest in reuniting Prospero with his brother who had usurped his dukedom, and the utility of the fog and the forest in disorienting and separating the shipwrecked people. They are fascinated by Caliban and by the idea that his mother had been an evil witch. They are delighted by Ariel's antics and are much interested in his desire for freedom. That Prospero and Miranda live in a comfortably arranged cave with many of Prospero's books also intrigues them. After I read the story, we have a lively discussion. At this point, most of the children are only mildly enthusiastic about studying Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare*; actually, they are being indulgent toward me. When I ask each child to draw a picture of the scene of his choice and write one sentence of explanation, I am always amazed both by what has captured their fancy and by the level of understanding their work reveals. I find that a carefully structured approach to the plays, particularly to the first ones we study, helps immeasurably to minimize the children's confusion and hence frustration. Fortunately, Charles and Mary Lamb were keenly aware of the need to simplify for children. Indeed, that was their primary thrust; and toward that goal they took three crucial steps. They concentrated on the major characters only, they emphasized only the most important events, and they told the story of each play without reference to acts and scenes.

The second play that I teach is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which, as it happens, is the second story in the Lambs' book. First we examine the cast of characters. Then we discuss the locale of the story, find Greece on the map, and discuss the fact that medieval cities were surrounded by high walls with guarded gates. The children are interested in the fairies and take an immediate liking to Puck because of his mischievous nature. As I read,

I stop to discuss with the group the meanings of words and of concepts that might be new to them. When Oberon claps the ass's head onto Bottom, they are delighted by my laughter and eagerly join me. Until that point, I think they feel that any study of Shakespeare should be quite solemn; but my obvious amusement gives them a new perspective. As soon as I finish reading the story, they ask whether they may perform it as a play. Because of time limitations, I stipulate their performing only a few scenes. They cast the play and divide the responsibilities of scenery, props, script-writing, and programmes. They usually work quite efficiently in small groups, consulting me only occasionally when they are unsure of details or need permission to go to the library. The scenery committee does a backdrop of woods and a lake. Then the students locate a book with a wonderful picture of a medieval town and translate that into their own version of Athens. Very early we decide not to have costumes, though the props committee does make fairy caps and crowns and wands. Both Egeus and Theseus have staffs, and one year the boy cast as Bottom made an ass's head which we continue to use. As the script evolves, most young writers concentrate on the narration; consequently, this production is usually done in the style of pantomime with an attendant narrator. The rug in my classroom becomes the stage, and the blackboard contains the programme. The children perform for the rest of the fourth graders and sometimes adult visitors. The quality of the narration inevitably stuns me by its capture of the Lambs' inimitable phrasing and the writers begin by saying, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare as retold by Charles and Mary Lamb". That introduction alone tells me that the Lambs' are once again creating magic for children.

The third story that I read is *As You Like It*. As I read, I point out to the children the blithe way in which Shakespeare places a lion in a forest in France. In conjunction with that startling fact, I mention that most of his countrymen did not know better, that Shakespeare himself may not have known better, and that anyhow such an error in one of Shakespeare's plays really makes no difference because his power as a storyteller and his genius as a poet transcend all minor details. (Though I have no time to inform them of the anachronisms of chimney tops and striking clocks in Rome in *Juilius Caesar*, I think of these as integral to an incredible dramatic genius who was unconcerned with the research of such details. Unlike other critics, the Lambs wisely ignored these inconsistencies and concentrated on the riches of the play). The plot of *As You Like It* is so contrived that, with my help, the children are able to appreciate the ridiculousness of both circumstance and behaviour. I also explain at length the habits of dress in the Middle Ages which denoted rank or occupation and which therefore made successful disguise much easier to achieve than it would be today when people of all levels of affluence and all walks of life dress very similarly. The children are particularly intrigued by the idea that girls could and did pretend to be boys. They are by now so relaxed with Shakespeare and so interested in his work that they do two things which I consider significant. They begin to ask what we will read next, and they use their library time to search for copies of Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* so that they can read along with me. Several of the children check out all of our library's copies of Lamb, and then several others check out similar volumes by other writers such as Irene Buckman and Babette Deutsch. This they do reluctantly and with a sense of frustration that they cannot get the Lamb.

The fourth play we look at is *The Two Gentleman of Verona*. Again two elements that capture the group's attention in *As You Like It* are present-- girls posing as boys and an obviously contrived plot. The fact that Proteus can have such sudden and dramatic changes of heart, and of character, strike them as very funny; but they also see that such a vacillating person would be untrustworthy in the real world. We comment on the similarity between the band of robbers in the Forest of Arden and Robin Hood's band in Sherwood Forest.

The fifth play we read is *The Taming of the Shrew*. By this time the children understand clearly that Shakespeare had hoped to cause laughter, and they laugh freely. It intrigues me to note their progress in interpreting Shakespeare's intentions. Quickly and without my prompting, they grasp Petruchio's plan to conquer Katharine's willful spirit. When we reach the scene in which the new bridegrooms wager about their brides' respective levels of obedience, the children become quite excited because they are able to anticipate the outcome and are thrilled that they can. To document their understanding of this play, we study the meaning of the word 'caricature', and they then draw cartoons. I also tell them about the successful Broadway musical 'Kiss Me, Kate' which is based on *The Taming of the Shrew*.

For the sixth play we choose *Twelfth Night*. As soon as the children hear about the shipwreck and about the identical twins, Viola and Sebastian, they understand that this play involves a series of misunderstandings based upon mistaken identity. They chortle gleefully and knowingly when Viola assumes a man's attire and are much amused by her veiled speeches of love to Orsino as well as by Olivia's to her. When Viola is challenged to a duel, their excitement mounts and is only momentarily checked by the appearance of her rescuer because they quickly perceive that he must think her Sebastian. In their pictures, many of the children choose to draw Viola in a man's apparel and then in a lady's.

At this time, having read six of the Lambs' stories and the children's having illustrated and commented on each, I suggest that we display some of their work. Every year they are immediately enthusiastic, and this year they asked to use the bulletin board outside our classroom. While I selected the particular illustrations to be used, being careful to choose work from each of the plays and from as many of the children as possible, a committee discussed the caption and agreed unanimously that it should be 'Shakespeare is Fun'. Without any guidance from me, they selected the largest lettering available, made the letters, and made an exclamation point to follow their statement. Many of them were so pleased with the results that they brought parents and friends to see their work. My heart leapt up to see a Shakespearian rainbow in the sky.

One Monday morning several excited children rushed to tell me that two of the girls were bringing a surprise. The surprise was a three-dimensional model of a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* showing Hermia and Lysander talking in the woods. The girls had devoted the entire weekend to constructing it simply because they wished to express their enjoyment of that play.

The next play that we read is *The Merchant of Venice*. In order to minimize the unsympathetic picture Shakespeare creates of Shylock, the Jew, I dwell not on Shylock's religion but rather on his occupation as a usurer. I

mention that even today we have loan sharks who are ruthless in demanding exorbitant interest rates and prompt payment. The children are impressed by the fact that Portia, disguised as a man, outwits the shrewd Shylock and eventually through her cogent arguments persuades the judge to be merciful to Antonio. The Lambs paraphrase Portia's masterful speech on mercy but retain the beauty of it to an amazing degree:

she spoke so sweetly of the noble quality of *mercy*, as would have softened any heart but the unfeeling Shylock's; said that it dropped as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath; and how mercy was a double blessing, it blessed him that gave, and him that received it; and how it became monarchs better than their crowns, being an attribute of God himself; and that earthly power came nearest to God's, in proportion as mercy tempered justice; and she bid Shylock remember that as we all pray for mercy, that same prayer should teach us to show mercy. (2)

The Lambs present Portia's arguments and Shylock's reactions with such simplicity and clarity that the children are able to follow each new turn with ease and to relish the subtle way in which Portia leads Shylock to his downfall.

Before we move on to the conclusion, I have the children speculate about Shylock's ultimate decision (that is, whether or not he will accept Antonio's offer and leave half his fortune to his daughter) and also encourage them to debate the various parts of the court's decision from the varying viewpoints of Shylock, Lorenzo, Bassanio, and Antonio.

By this time every year several of the children are pressing me to read *Romeo and Juliet*, the title of which is familiar to them. Always two or three children have seen the ballet on television, and we discuss the many ways in which Shakespeare's plays are regularly translated into present-day art forms that did not exist in his own day. As soon as possible I read the play to them. Every year they are absolutely enthralled. Again, the children profit immensely from the Lambs' judicious selection of both details and characters and also from their simplification of plot. From this play the children learn the meanings of such words as 'banishment', 'apothecary', and 'sarcophagus'. Although at times the vocabulary the Lambs use presents a real challenge to modern children, I find that my recognition of the difficult language, my encouraging them to enlarge their vocabularies, and my praise of their efforts make them eager to acquire mastery of these new words. We discuss the matter of family burial vaults; the fact that friars lived in rooms called cells; the prevalence of daggers, swords, and poisons; the modern use of the word 'apothecary' in Britain; and the fact that until quite recently pharmacists often mixed up medicines or potions for their customers. We comment that we have already read *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* which is set in the same city in which the Capulets and the Montagues live. I point out the significance attached to dreams in medieval times as signified by Romeo's reaction to his dream of death which immediately precedes his hearing of Juliet's death. The children are alert to the series of errors which lead to the ultimate tragedy and are relieved that Friar Laurence, the genial herbalist, is finally exonerated.

As soon as I come to the end of the Lambs' story of *Romeo and Juliet*, in concert the children ask permission to dramatize this famous play. Although

I am unable to agree to a total reenactment, we discuss what is viable and settle on a portrayal of Juliet's frantic conference with Friar Laurence after learning of her father's arrangements to marry her to Count Paris; a relation of Romeo's desperate decision to purchase poison, hurry to Verona to gaze upon his dead wife and then to die by her side; and the final scene in which Romeo reluctantly kills Count Paris before taking the poison, Juliet awakes to discover her husband lying lifeless near her and in abject grief stabs herself with his dagger; and together Friar Laurence and the Prince of Verona are at last able to reconcile the houses of Capulet and Montague. In order to show the children how to write dialogue based on a story, I take the Lambs' book; and as I think aloud, I write the play with the class listening and sometimes interjecting ideas. We then assign parts, children paint scenes of Juliet's bedroom and of the Capulets' tomb, and others cover a table with brown paper to serve as Juliet's sarcophagus. All of this art work requires trips to the library to find appropriate pictures, particularly of the tomb and the sarcophagus. This year the girl chosen to be Juliet designed and made a dress out of blue paper which had great puffed sleeves and a scalloped hemline. Otherwise for our performance which we give for the rest of the fourth grade, we do not worry about costumes. After all, children are quite capable of imagining sets, costumes, and props. The children perform these selected scenes with great gusto and with an astounding depth of sensitivity.

Since *Romeo and Juliet* is the first of Shakespeare's tragedies that we read, before beginning the next play I ask the class to tell me ways in which *Romeo and Juliet* differs from the other plays we have read. They mention the early deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, the long-standing enmity between the Capulets and the Montagues, the plans Juliet's father makes for her life without consulting her at all, the use of both a magical potion (reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and poison, and the ultimate tragedy of the double death. I then lead them to conclude that tragedies have unhappy endings whereas comedies, though often fraught with great difficulties and even the threat of dire consequences, always have happy endings.

As you know, *Tales from Shakespeare* is a volume written originally in the early nineteenth century for Godwin's Juvenile Library, one of the earliest series of children's books ever published. Mary Lamb wrote most of the comedies, (3) but Charles wrote the tragedies. Perhaps because of his much greater experience as a writer, essentially Charles was able to incorporate more nearly successfully the language of Shakespeare. As always, however, Charles was sensitive to Mary's feelings. Together they penned the Preface in which they explain the difficulties of preserving Shakespeare's relative language thus.

In the Preface which the Lambs wrote, they say:

In those tales which have been taken from the Tragedies, the young readers will perceive, when they come to see the source from which these stories are derived, that Shakespeare's own words, with little alteration, recur very frequently in the narrative as well as in the dialogue; but in those made from the Comedies the writers found themselves scarcely ever able to turn his words into the narrative form: therefore it is feared that, in them, dialogue has been made use of too frequently for young people not accustomed to the dramatic form of writing. But this fault, if it be a fault,

has been caused by an earnest wish to give as much of Shakespeare's own words as possible: and if the 'He said', and 'She said', the question and the reply, should sometimes seem tedious to their young ears, they must pardon it, because it was the only way in which could be given to them a few hints and little foretastes of the great pleasure which awaits them in their older years, when they come to the rich treasures from which these small and valueless coins are extracted; pretending to no other merit than as faint and imperfect stamps of Shakespeare's matchless image. Faint and imperfect images they must be called, because the beauty of his language is too frequently destroyed by the necessity of changing many of his excellent words into words far less expressive of his true sense, to make it read something like prose; and even in some few places, where his blank verse is given unaltered, as hoping from its simple plainness to cheat the young readers into the belief that they are reading prose, yet still his language being transplanted from its own natural soil and wild poetic garden, it must want much of its native beauty. (4)

The next play that we read is *Hamlet*, and the children are quite excited because they are encountering a familiar name. As preparation, I explain that Prince Hamlet is a very young man and that this play tells his story which is that of a gentle man, much more concerned with the life of the mind and with the life of feelings than with the life of a warrior. Yet he has been trained from infancy in the Nordic tradition which demands that a family member who cares must seek vengeance for the murder of a loved one.

Having prepared the children carefully for a study of this great tragedy, I begin to read the Lambs' version of *Hamlet* to them. As I read about Queen Gertrude and her marriage after only two months to her husband's brother, the children grasp the point that although widows do often remarry, they do not usually remarry immediately after they have been widowed and furthermore, they do not generally marry their brothers-in-law. Although the children can visualize being distraught over such actions, they are entranced by Shakespeare's description of Hamlet's reaction--his loss of his youthful zest for life --as paraphrased by the Lambs:

he grew weary of the world, which seemed to him an unweeded garden, where all the wholesome flowers were choked up, and nothing but weeds could thrive. (5)

Because he suspects his uncle, now his step-father, Claudius, of being the serpent that stung his father, and because he wonders about the possibility of his mother's involvement in his father's death, Hamlet seeks every possible avenue to learn the truth. The children are quite excited by his reasoning, which we discuss at some length. They must look up the words 'apparition' and 'watch' as Shakespeare uses them here. When the children realize that the apparition is indeed the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father and that the ghost and Hamlet converse, they are truly intrigued. The ghost's account of the unusual manner of his death fascinates them, so much so that later several children illustrate Claudius in the act of pouring henbane into his brother's ears. They are also interested in the fact that even as the ghost requires Hamlet to avenge his death, he cautions Hamlet

by no means to act any violence against the person of his mother, but to leave her to heaven, and to the stings and thorns of conscience. (6)

I tell the children that 'leave her to heaven' is a very famous quotation and that it has been used in recent years as the name of a novel and a movie. Some of the children are so impressed by this scene that in their drawings they show Hamlet talking with the ghost.

The children and I discuss insanity, learn that 'lunacy' is a synonym for that disease, and speculate about how successful Hamlet may be in assuming the guise of lunacy in order to disarm Claudius. Some of the children conclude that this could be very difficult to manage for an extended period and would require wonderful acting from Hamlet. I seize this opportunity to tell them that we have now touched upon one of the chief reasons for the veneration among actors of this role. To act successfully the role of Hamlet requires consummate skill and artistry. Because the character Hamlet is a youth but to achieve the proper results requires great depth of understanding and wide experience, this role is considered to be one of the most challenging in all of drama. I mention that each great actor who undertakes the role gives the world new understandings of this complex character. I further explain that in addition to the various insights which individual actors give us, everyone who writes critically about Hamlet also gives us new perspectives. I remind the children that in our initial discussions of Shakespeare and of Charles and Mary Lamb, I told them that prior to his deciding to write *Tales from Shakespeare*, in the early nineteenth century through his critical articles, Lamb regenerated an interest in Shakespeare and was significantly responsible for returning Shakespeare to his rightful position as our foremost writer in English. Before we move on in *Hamlet*, I make one other point using the character of Hamlet as a preeminent example. I stress that the complexity of this character which provides us with endless possibilities of interpretation, of character development and analysis, and of applications to life, is due to the unsurpassed genius of Shakespeare himself.

We now learn that the king, the queen, and Polonius, the king's chief advisor, are soon convinced that Hamlet's strange and erratic behaviour arises from his love for Ophelia. The children are amused by what they see as their own knowing insight as opposed to the adults' misinterpretation of Hamlet's actions. We discuss Hamlet's uncertainties and insecurities, and the children sympathize with him. Lamb gives a magnificent explanation of Hamlet's dilemma.

Besides, the very circumstance that the usurper was his mother's husband filled him with some remorse, and still blunted the edge of his purpose. The mere act of putting a fellow creature to death was itself odious and terrible to a disposition naturally so gentle as Hamlet's was. His very melancholy, and the dejection of spirits he had so long been in, produced an irresoluteness and wavering of purpose, which kept him from proceeding to extremities. Moreover, he could not help having some scruples upon his mind, whether the spirit which he had seen was indeed his father, or whether it might not be the devil, who he had heard has power to take any form he pleases, and who might have assumed his father's shape only to take advantage of his weakness and his melancholy, to drive him to the doing of so desperate an act as murder. And he determined that he



would have more certain grounds to go upon than a vision, or apparition, which might be a delusion. (7)

Lamb's explication of the complex nature of Shakespeare's most famous character is masterful in both its simplicity and its depth of understanding. In the space of a few lines deliberately phrased to enlighten children and help them to grasp the heart of Hamlet's problem and the depths of his agony, Lamb also informs, with sensitivity and clarity, without compromising intellectual integrity, both the young reader, for whom Lamb intended (perhaps exclusively) his summary of Shakespeare's tragedy and also a more mature reader seeking a knowledge of Shakespeare's work which he had never expected to possess.

The children express deep appreciation for the ingenious way in which Hamlet uses the travelling players to confirm in his own mind his uncle's guilt. Again, Lamb's explanation is clear and concise because he wisely eliminates many details and concentrates on the events of primary significance; consequently, the children have no difficulty understanding Hamlet's plan. Because they are already privy to the truth which consists in the dramatic irony that Hamlet's mother, though unwise in her present actions, does love her son, they exhibit great curiosity concerning the action Hamlet will take. They are surprised when the queen summons Hamlet to her room, and they are even more surprised to learn that Polonius is hidden behind the curtains to spy on Hamlet. They nod with calm sagacity when Lamb avers:

This artifice was particularly adapted to the disposition of Polonius, who was a man grown old in crooked maxims and policies of state, and delighted to get at the knowledge of matters in an indirect and cunning way. (8)

Even as Lamb reports the tense confrontation between the queen and her son, he reminds his young readers that no child should criticize a parent lightly:

And though the faults of parents are to be tenderly treated by their children, yet in the case of great crimes the son may have leave to speak even to his own mother with some harshness, so as that harshness is meant for her good, and to turn her from her wicked ways, and not done for the purpose of upbraiding. (9)

As Lamb subtly reveals, Hamlet forces his mother to look at herself clearly. When at last she does, she is appalled by her own conduct and promises Hamlet that she will repent and seek forgiveness. The children are impressed that in the midst of Hamlet's exhortation of his mother, his father's ghost once again appears to demand revenge but also to express concern for the queen.

The girls perceive more readily than the boys that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is the chief cause of his grief over having killed Polonius, her father. Hamlet's subsequent banishment to England together with his confirming the king's treachery and changing the names in the king's letters from his own to those of the king's courtiers amuses the children. I tell them that the courtiers, though in Lamb's account unnamed, are the central characters in a modern play called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The gentle pirates who capture and then release Hamlet, albeit to procure kindly treatment at court, please the children immensely.

The tragic madness and death of Ophelia brings to a head the growing enmity between her brother Laertes and Hamlet, two youths who were once close friends. Lamb explains clearly the manner in which the king uses Laertes' grief and anger to plot Hamlet's death. Since all courtiers are skilled in fencing, Laertes challenges Hamlet to a friendly fencing match instigated by King Claudius. Lamb outlines the details of the fight giving his readers the pertinent facts and reasons in terms as simple as possible. As Hamlet at last avenges his father's death, the children are torn between rejoicing over the justice of Claudius' death and grieving over the tragic injustice of Hamlet's death. To conclude his account of this tragedy, Lamb once again incorporates Shakespeare's beautiful language in a special way:

Horatio promised that he would make a true report ... And thus satisfied, the noble heart of Hamlet cracked; and Horatio and the bystanders with many tears commended the spirit of this sweet prince to the guardianship of angels. For Hamlet was a loving and a gentle prince, and greatly beloved for his noble and princelike qualities; and if he had lived, would no doubt have proved a most royal and complete king to Denmark. (10).

Much has been made of the generally held opinion that Charles Lamb felt Shakespeare's plays could not be, and therefore should not, be acted satisfactorily. Yet, from his first experience as a part of a theater audience which he so eloquently describes for us in the Elian essay 'My First Play', (11) Lamb was an inveterate theater-goer and saw many of Shakespeare's plays performed numerous times. To reconcile this seeming dichotomy, I read Lamb's famous critical essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with References to Their Fitness for Stage Representation'. This famous essay appeared first in the fourth number of Leigh Hunt's *Reflector* in 1812 and later in Lamb's *Works* in 1818. In his own words Lamb gives us his reflections concerning the performances of John Philip Kemble as Hamlet and of Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth:

Never let me be so ungrateful as to forget the very high degree of satisfaction which I received some years back from seeing for the first time a tragedy of Shakespeare performed, in which those two great performers sustained the principal parts. It seemed to embody and realize conceptions which had hitherto assumed no distinct shape. But dearly do we pay all our life after for this juvenile pleasure, this sense of distinctness. 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. (12)

A little later in this most famous of Lamb's critical essays he avers:

It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguishing excellence is a reason that they should be so. There is so much in them, which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye and tone, and gesture have nothing to do. (13)

Lamb goes on to explain that although in a dramatic production an actor

playing Hamlet has no choice but to speak his quite private and introspective thoughts aloud so that the audience can understand what is happening in Hamlet's mind, that very necessity to communicate aloud both limits the audience's concept to the present actor's interpretation (and emphasis) and infringes upon Hamlet's most private and self-absorbing intellectual life. On the other hand, Lamb maintains that the reader can grasp Shakespeare's concept with ease and accuracy since no human distractions hinder the reader from experiencing Shakespeare's genius in its purest form. (14) Lamb says, 'but I am not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted'. (15) One other of Lamb's observations may serve to clarify his basic distinctions between the wisdom of presenting other dramatists' works and Shakespeare's. He says:

I mean no disrespect to any actor, but the sort of pleasure which Shakespeare's plays give in the acting seems to me not at all to differ from that which the audience receive from those of other writers; and, *they being in themselves so essentially different from all others*, I must conclude that there is something in the nature of acting which levels all distinctions. (16)

One of the entrancing characteristics of Lamb is that his perspective--on whatever topic--is usually quite unique. Yet its originality is always grounded in experience, in careful study, and in truly intellectual retrospection which helps us as Elians to rethink and to sharpen our own views of literature and of its reflection of an illumination of life.

As you can imagine, I do not discuss with my young charges Lamb's critical questioning of the efficacy of acting Shakespeare's plays. I consider it enough to tell them that he is a Shakespearian critic of major importance. Perhaps at some point when they are more mature, a few of them will read his critical works and ponder them as we do. For my purposes it is sufficient to awaken within the children a genuine interest in Shakespeare and to do it by using the excellent work of Charles and Mary Lamb.

The next play we read in *King Lear*. First we discuss the term 'fourscore years' so that the children understand immediately that Lear is an old man, weary of work and responsibility but still expecting to be treated in every way as a king. As his two older daughters overflow with protestations of their love for Lear, the children immediately suspect their motives. Then Cordelia's reserve, contrasting as it does with her sisters' effulgence, confirms in their minds Goneril and Regan's hypocrisy and Cordelia's true devotion. They are horrified by Lear's treatment of Cordelia and are not surprised when Goneril and Regan begin to mistreat him and to plot to humiliate him totally. They are fascinated by the lengths to which Kent and the fool go to serve Lear with unselfish loyalty. Lamb wisely concentrates on the essential elements and characters of the drama, dwelling on the great theme of credit upon which Shakespeare expounds in numerous ways and through an amazing number and variety of characters. Although Lear is always the pivotal character, others of all stations and walks of life Shakespeare uses to enlarge upon and emphasize this central theme. Where is one's credit? Do one's past actions count for nothing? Can human frailties really dictate the course of human affairs? We discuss these questions at some length; and the children, by now veteran students of Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, are able to find suitable answers in the

text as well as at times in their own minds. Although as we know, the ending is as complicated as the rest of the play, Lamb sums it up quite succinctly for his young audience thus:

How the judgment of Heaven overtook the bad earl of Gloucester (Edmund); whose treasons were discovered, and himself slain in single combat with his brother, the lawful earl (Edgar); and how Goneril's husband, the duke of Albany, who was innocent of the death of Cordelia, and had never encouraged his lady in her wicked proceedings against her father, ascended the throne of Britain after the death of Lear, is needless here to narrate; Lear and his Three Daughters being dead whose adventures alone concern our story. (17)

The gift of simplifying complex plots, themes, and characters while simultaneously emphasizing all of the truly important factors in a play is one that the Lambs possessed and is one which I believe contributes immeasurably to the continuing sustained success of *Tales from Shakespeare*.

One of the children's favourite plays is *Macbeth*. Over the years that I have taught Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare*, a number of children have made wonderful and remarkably varied drawings of the witches. Last year one child brought in a three-dimensional scene of the witches, complete even to the cauldron which one was stirring. The witches and their predictions given in riddles fascinate the children as does the immediate and lasting influence which their prophecies exercise on *Macbeth*. They understand at once the powerful and evil sway which Lady *Macbeth's* ruthless ambition holds over her husband. They grasp the essence of the moral struggle which *Macbeth* wages and realize that had he been left to make his own decision, he might well have chosen to remain loyal to Duncan. With Lady *Macbeth* constantly urging him to commit treachery, however, his weaker will finally succumbs to her wishes. They thoroughly enjoy *Macbeth's* reaction to the sight of Banquo's ghost at the great dinner as well as his visit to the witches' cave where his hostesses call forth spirits to advise him. Although at first the children do not understand the prophecy concerning the movement of Birnam wood to Dunsinane hill, once we discuss the methods of camouflage that modern armies use, they become quite excited and eager for the denouement which follows quickly as each of the spirits' prophecies upon which *Macbeth* has shored up his courage is revealed as a mere shadow of truth. Yet even as the children rejoice over the ultimate triumph of good, they are relieved to learn that faced with a choice of disgrace or death in battle, *Macbeth* chooses death.

When I first decided to teach Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* to my class of young children some years ago, I was somewhat puzzled by the fact that the Lambs had chosen Shakespeare's last play to be the first in their book. Gradually, however, I have come to see the wisdom of their decision. *The Tempest*, coming at the end of Shakespeare's career as a playwright, is the exquisite culmination of all aspects of his great artistry distilled with deceptive ease into his valedictory gift to mankind. As such, it is the perfect vehicle to capture untutored and unformed young minds and to entrance them with his inimitable magic. From it I move to other comedies, knowing that the humour they contain will please the children and that whatever crude or illogical details they contain, whatever lack of finesse they exhibit, will escape the children's notice. I choose *Romeo and Juliet* as the first tragedy for us to study partly because the children are

aware of its existence and partly because through experience I have learned that they always react to it quite positively. My choosing *Macbeth* as our final selection rests on their deriving obvious pleasure from studying a play with witches and spirits, ghosts and puzzling prophecies. Certainly it is a play inferior in many ways to others we study earlier, but my students, being as yet very young and in the earliest stages of learning to evaluate and appreciate literature, do not perceive the weaknesses and do respond enthusiastically to the strengths of *Macbeth*. Therefore it follows *King Lear* in our sequence. In a society where children usually turn on the television and take no further active part in their entertainment (a situation I am certain the Lambs would abhor), I feel our study of Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* should end with a play which they can all enjoy even as they expand their horizons.

One can see from the observations I have recorded that the Lambs continue to enrich the world by making the greatness of Shakespeare accessible to young children. As the publisher notes in a biographical comment, 'Canon Ainger once wrote that he knew of no introduction to Shakespeare "at once so winning and so helpful as that supplied by these narrative versions".' (18) Based upon my own experience with using Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* with fourth graders, I heartily concur with Canon Ainger that the sensitivity, the scholarship, and the genius of Charles and Mary Lamb illuminate for children on every page of their unique and wonderful book the glories of our foremost writer. For this, the world owes the Lambs a debt of immeasurable magnitude, a debt the Lambs themselves must feel is amply repaid by children's continuing joyous reception of their work. And let none of us Elians forget that their extraordinary contribution has never once been out-of-print since 1807.

#### NOTES

1. Charles and Mary Lamb. *Tales from Shakespeare* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1982), p. vii.
2. *Ibid.* *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 92.
3. Publishers' comment on the jacket.
4. *Ibid.*, Preface, pp. v-vi.
5. *Ibid.*, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, p. 256.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 271
11. Charles Lamb. *The Essays of Elia and the Last Essays of Elia*, 'My First Play' (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 140-145.
12. Roy Park, Editor. *Lamb as Critic* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 87.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

16. Ibid., p. 93.
17. Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare, King Lear*, p. 135.
18. Ibid. Biographical information given on the copyright page by the publisher.

DOROTHY WORDSWORTH AND MARY LAMB, WRITERS

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With six Tales between them still to do, Mary was looking out for further literary work. 'I shall soon have done my work', she wrote to Sarah in July,

and know not what to begin next. Now will you set your brains to work and invent a story either for a short child's story or a long one that would make a kind of Novel or a Story that would make a play. Charles wants me to write a play but I am not over anxious to set about it, but seriously will you draw me out a skeleton of a story either from memory of any thing that you have read or from your own invention and I will fit it up in some way or other.

(Marrs, II, 235)

The skeleton of a story Mary somehow found and it became *Mrs Leicester's School, or The History of Several Young Ladies, related by themselves*, published in 1809. The structure is one that Mary, as she notes in the Preface, 'had read in old authors': strangers, in a *Decameron*-like framework, tell their own stories. Only here, the narrators are children; they have come from a comfortable enough world, but have often had to adjust to the death of a parent. In one rambling story by the very youngest child, Mary draws upon her visit as a girl of fourteen or fifteen with Charles as a little boy to her mother's aunt at the farm at Mackery End, Hertfordshire, and she writes largely from within a child's vision. As always it is through the calling-up of particular detail that place is evoked:

on summer nights the fire would be lit and old Spot the shepherd used to take his place in the chimney corner; after the hottest day in summer, there old Spot used to sit. It was a seat within the fire-place, quite under the chimney, and over his head the bacon hung.

When old Spot was seated, the milk was hung in a skillet over the fire, and then the men used to come and sit down at the long white table.

(Marrs, III, 288)

The teach, historiographer as she calls herself, 'M.B.', not openly Mary Lamb, interrupts and stops this narrator, Louisa Manners. M.B. confesses that she 'loved to hear you prattle of your early recollections', but feels

that others might weary of a story with no action and no ending in sight. Mary Lamb is right both to let Louisa prattle and to stop her. Louisa's vocabulary, like that of any child of seven, is repetitive, yet the charm that made Coleridge call *Mrs Leicester's School* 'a rich jewel in the treasury of our permanent English Literature' is surely involved with the short sentences, simple repeated words, and straightforward recounting of discovery:

Then I remember the wood-house; it had once been a large barn, but being grown old, the wood was kept there. My sister and I used to peep about the faggots to find the eggs the hens sometimes left there. Birds' nests we might not look for. Grandmamma was very angry once, when Will Tasker brought home a bird's nest, full of pretty speckled eggs, for me. She sent him back to the hedge with it again. She said, the little birds would not sing any more, if their eggs were taken away from them.

A hen, she said, was a hospitable bird, and always laid more eggs than she wanted, on purpose to give her mistress to make puddings and custards with.

I do not know which pleased grandmamma best, when we carried her home a lap-full of eggs, or a few violets; for she was particularly fond of violets.

Violets were very scarce; we used to search very carefully for them every morning, round by the orchard hedge, and Sarah used to carry a stick in her hand to beat away the nettles; for very frequently the hens left their eggs among the nettles. If we could find eggs and violets too, what happy children we were!

(Works, III, 285-6)

While Mary's tale totally enters the eternal summer world of childhood, Charles' essay, 'Mackery End in Hertfordshire', an Elian essay of 1821, is quite different; it is a complex meditation about present as well as remembered time. An adult mind is in conscious charge and Charles watches himself as well as Bridget (Mary Lamb) as she re-visits the scene of the past:

Bridget's was more a waking bliss than mine, for she easily remembered her old acquaintance again - some altered features, of course, a little grudged at. At first, indeed, she was ready to disbelieve for joy; but the scene soon reconfirmed itself in her affections - and she traversed every outpost of the old mansion, to the wood-house, the orchard, the place where the pigeon-house had stood (house and birds were alike flown) - with a breathless impatience of recognition, which was more pardonable perhaps than decorous at the age of fifty odd. But Bridget in some things is behind her years.

While Mary was involved with *Mrs Leicester's School* (she wrote seven of the ten stories and it was published anonymously), Dorothy Wordsworth was writing in spring 1808 the *Narrative of the Greens*. This was acknowledged as Dorothy's but, as it was handed about in manuscript in order to raise

money for children suddenly orphaned in Grasmere, relatively few people knew it. It was not fiction. Dorothy's response was to immediate need. Mary Lamb, on the other hand, was comfortable within a fictional structure. She was also a great reader of contemporary fiction: the Lambs' common reading-table was 'daily fed with assiduously fresh supplies' of 'some modern tale or adventure' ('Mackery End'). Dorothy Wordsworth seems not to have read much modern fiction and never tried to write it. Her *Narrative* was written at the request of Wordsworth and he entreated her, by his own account, to 'give a *minute detail* of all the particulars which had come within her notice' so that a record might be left behind of 'human sympathies and moral sentiments'. Dorothy writes as though she is speaking unhurriedly to a friend; the *Narrative* is 'Addressed to a Friend', and the tone is intimate as Dorothy draws us in to the story of real death one March night when the parents of six children, the eldest only eleven, were lost in snow, and died on the hills above their own cottage: 'You remember a single Cottage at the foot of Blentern Gill. . . ' Dorothy herself is a presence in the account, confirming its truth as she demonstrates how easy it was to be lost by recalling that she herself had been almost lost in that same area: in the search for the bodies footmarks had been seen, the

indistinct foot-marks of two Persons who had walked close together. Thos foot-marks were now covered with fresh snow: the spot where they had been seen was at the top of Blea Crag above Easedale Tarn, that very spot where I myself had sate down six years ago, unable to see a yard before me, or to go a step further over the Crags. I had left W. at Stickell Tarn. A mist came on after I had parted with him, and I wandered long, not knowing whither. When at last the mist cleared away I found myself at the edge of the Precipice, and trembled at the Gulph below, which appeared immeasurable. . .

(*Narrative*, 45-6)

The children's waiting, the search, the funeral, the people who were to give the children homes, the village committee to oversee a trust fund, all is convincing in detail. The children behaved so well that 'I am almost afraid', Dorothy wrote, 'that you may have thought

my account of the characters of the Children but a Romance, a dream of fanciful feeling proceeding in great measure from pity. . .

(*Narrative*, 73-4)

She need not have feared that her readers would suspect Romance: the real world Dorothy knew is a felt presence. Jane, the eldest child, did not let the fire go out, since they hadn't the convenience of a tinder box; a slice of bread and butter quieted a crying little boy; the cow was grown old and 'did not give a quart of milk in the day'; the oaken cupboard was bright with rubbing- the mother, Sarah Green, had offered a glass of gin the summer before to a visitor, Mary Cowperthwaite; with the words,

"I should not have had it to offer you if it had not been for that little thing", pointing to the cradle, "it has been badly in its bowels, and they told me that a little common gin would mend it". . .

(*Narrative*, 81-2)



On every page there is the ring of truth. A comparison with De Quincey's brilliant and dramatic account of 1839 confirms our sense of Dorothy's inside knowledge and honesty. Her *Narrative* was not published in full until De Selincourt's edition of 1936. Dorothy only once considered setting up as an author; that was in 1822 when she did a revision of the Journal of her Scottish Tour of 1803. This was hopefully to make money for such another Continental jaunt as she and the Wordsworths had just had in 1820. Nothing came of this. Two of her accounts of excursions were, as it happens, in part published in 1822 and 1823, but not as by Dorothy. Wordsworth considerably revised Dorothy's November 1805 journal of their 3-day walk along the shores of Ullswater and into Martindale, and her more recent account of 1818 of her ascent of Scafell with Miss Barker. These were printed at the end of the *Guide to the Lakes*. Wordsworth clearly recognised their power; here, for instance, is an accurate enough impression of the summit of Scafell which also conveys Dorothy's astonishment at being there and being in such privileged touch with the things of ancient time:

. . . huge blocks & stones . . . cover the summit & lie in heaps all round to a great distance, like Skeletons or bones of the earth not wanted at the creation, & there left to be covered with never-dying lichens which the Clouds and dews nourish. . .

Two poems, 'By a female Friend of the Author', had been included in Wordsworth's *Poems* (1815); both were for children, one, not surprisingly, on the subject of wind, 'Address to a Child, During a boisterous Winter Evening'. Dorothy wrote it in 1806 for little Johnny, and it has a rollicking rush and finish:

What way does the wind come? what way does he go?  
He rides over the water and over the snow,  
Through the valley, and over the hill  
And roars as loud as a thundering Mill.  
He tosses about in every bare tree,  
As, if you look up you plainly may see  
But how he will come, and whither he goes  
There's never a Scholar in England knows . . .

As soon as 'tis daylight tomorrow with me  
You shall go to the orchard & there you will see  
That he has been there, & made a great rout,  
And cracked the branches, & stre'd them about:  
Heaven grant that he spare but that one upright twig  
That look'd up at the sky so proud & so big  
All last summer, . . .

And so it goes on to its comfortable ending,

Let him seek his own home wherever it be  
Here's a canny warm house for Johnny and me.

*Poetry for Children* was the title of the Lambs' next publication for the new Juvenile Library. Two volumes were published in 1809. 'By the Author of Mrs Leicester's School'. Mary again wrote two-thirds. When Charles ended his essay, 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading' with the anecdote about the street-reader who got through two volumes of *Clarissa* at a book-stall in snatched moments, he concluded, 'a quaint poetess of our day has

moralized upon this subject in two very touching but homely stanzas'. These he quotes. And here is the first of Mary's stanzas:

I saw a boy with eager eye  
 Open a book upon a stall,  
 And read as he'd devour it all:  
 Which when the stall-man did espy,  
 Soon to the boy I heard him call,  
 "You, Sir, you never buy a book,  
 Therefore in one you shall not look".  
 The boy pass'd slowly on, and with a sigh  
 He wish'd he never had been taught to read,  
 Then of the old churl's books he had no need.

('The Two Boys')

'A quaint poetess', 'Touching but homely'; 'task-work', Lamb sheepishly termed the volumes when he invited Coleridge in June 1809, to admire 'the number of subjects, all of children' and all 'picked out by an old Bachelor and old Maid. Many parents would not have found so many' (Lucas, II, 75). Lamb is right to draw attention to the variety of subject matter. The poems, with their gentle morals, would appeal to city children with governesses, toys, pets and visits to famous London places; they are often fables in the tradition of Isaac Watts, advocating good temper, moderation in diet, forgiveness after a quarrel. They rest on old-fashioned virtues, as in 'The Duty of a Brother':

Leave not your sister to another;  
 As long as both of you reside  
 In the same house, who but her brother  
 Should point her books, her studies guide?

And occasionally they recommend modern virtues, as in 'The Conquest of Prejudice' in which a scornful English lad comes to feel affection for the Negro boy Juba 'parch'd by Afric clime', and all the boys at school contend

who most shall make amends  
 For former slights to Afric's son.

Dorothy Wordsworth's very few verses for children, by contrast, were called up solely from her activities with the children at Dove Cottage. Her other verses, relatively few, likewise were for family or for close friends, for their autograph books and albums. Her own and family history was the subject, and this was earnestly generalised. Even when the verses were more clearly for herself, cries out of her illness and confinement, there was a need to summarise, and Dorothy's individual, seeing eye was diverted from the earlier moonshine like herrings, the scarlet Beans 'up in crowds', birch trees like 'large golden Flowers' or the need to help Aggie Fleming quilt a petticoat:

No prisoner am I on this couch  
 My mind is free to roam,  
 And leisure, peace and loving Friends  
 Are the best treasures of an earthly home.

Such gifts are mine: then why deplore  
 The body's gentle slow decay,  
 A warning mercifully sent  
 To fix my hopes upon a surer stay?

(Levin, 224)

Mary Lamb, by contrast, could escape her own history. Here, for instance, she and Charles look at Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*: each, in about 1805, wrote a verse tribute. Charles sent Mary's to Dorothy Wordsworth, 'sweet Lines, and upon a sweet Picture' (Marrs, II, 170):

MATERNAL lady with the virgin grace,  
 Heaven-born thy Jesus seemeth sure,  
 And thou a virgin pure.  
 Lady most perfect, when they angel face  
 Men look upon, they wish to be  
 A Catholic, Madonna fair, to worship thee.

In 1818 Lamb published both tributes (Mary's as 'by the Author's Sister') in his two-volume *Works*, where Mary's short verse of whole-hearted admiration rings clear and fresh next to Charles's elaborate composition derived too clearly from Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity'.

In October 1810, Dorothy Wordsworth came to stay for a few days with the Lambs and said that she 'never was a hundredth part so comfortable in London and I should have stayed at least a fortnight if all had gone on well at home' (*MY*, I, 439): Wordsworth's child Catharine was ill and Dorothy left London speedily. One evening she and Mary had gone to Covent Garden. But Mary became ill after Dorothy's visit, too ill to 'execute some commissions' Dorothy had requested. 'I ought to have perceived', wrote Dorothy in November, 'that everything out of the common course of her own daily life caused excitement and agitation equally injurious to her' (*MY*, I, 143). Mary, of her own accord, did something out of the common course and gave herself agitation in 1814 when alone, in no partnership with her brother, she chose to write for publication, again not under her own name. It was for the last time. Crabb Robinson recorded in his Diary for 11 December 1814:

. . . I went to Miss Lamb's and chatted with her, her brother being in bed, from ten to eleven. She was not unwell, but she had undergone great fatigue from writing an article about needlework for the new *Ladies' British Magazine*. She spoke of her writing as a most painful occupation, which only necessity could make her attempt. She has been learning Latin merely to assist her in acquiring a correct style. Yet, while she speaks of inability to write, what grace and talent has she not manifested in *Mrs Leicester's School*, etc! . . .

(Henry Crabb Robinson, *On Books and Writers*,  
 I, 156)

The following day, 12 December, Mary went to an asylum for a week. Her startling essay 'On Needlework', appeared in the *New British Lady's Magazine and Monthly Mirror of Literature and Fashion* on 1 April 1815,

signed 'Sempronia'. It begins

Mr Editor, - In early life I passed eleven years in the exercise of my needle for a livelihood. Will you allow-me to address your readers, among whom might perhaps be found some of the kind patronesses of my former humble labours, on a subject widely connected with female life - the state of needlework in this country.

To lighten the heavy burthen which many ladies impose upon themselves is one object which I have in view: but, I confess, my strongest motive is to excite attention towards the industrious sisterhood to which I once belonged.

(Works, I, 176)

Mary was apprenticed to a mantua-maker in her early teens. Since then her social class had changed, 'Among the present circle of my acquaintance I am proud to rank many that may truly be called respectable', and in this essay she addresses middle-class ladies on behalf of women, like her own former self, for whom sewing was livelihood. The sewing she had done at home was of course drudgery and frustration for Mary and must have contributed to the disastrous and violent breakdown of 1796, but none of that is discussed here. Her urgency is to channel all essential sewing into the hands of those who need it for money, for 'Workwomen of every description were never in so much distress for want of employment.' Ladies, argued Mary, must be persuaded to give up their needlework, even their fancy-work, done at home. The advantages for both groups of women would be considerable: 'needlework and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare', she wrote, and twenty years after Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she urged the lady, since 'the condition of a happy English wife' is 'the most common lot', to make herself 'a conversational companion', 'to study and understand'. This would help women to 'be upon an equality with men, as far as respects the mere enjoyment of life'. As it was, many a lady who filled her life with minutiae, what are called 'feminine dutes', 'allows not herself one quarter of an hour's positive leisure during her waking hours'. Positive leisure for the mind would result from laying aside 'the needle-book and thread-case', and thus the lady would contribute to 'the slender gains of the corset-maker, the milliner, the dress-maker, the plain-worker, the embroidress, and all the numerous classifications of females supporting themselves by *needle-work*, that great staple commodity which is alone appropriated to the self-supporting part of our sex.'

It was a radical enough notion, for ladies were entrenched needle-women. Dorothy Wordsworth, in 1787, aged fifteen, had to assume a girl's traditional role in her grandmother's house in Penrith. She would, she explained, have written sooner to her friend Jane Pollard,

if I had not had some work to finish before my Grandmother's coming down stairs, it was what I had neglected doing while my Brothers were here, as when they were with me I could always employ my time much more agreeably than in mending an old shirt. She did not know that I had not finished it and if I had not done it this morning she would have found me out.

(EY, 6)

She could manage to read her 'very pretty little collection of Books' from her brothers,

by working par[ticularly] hard for one hour I think I may read the next, without be[ing] discovered, and I rise pretty early in a morning . . .

(EY, 8)

Her conversation, such as it was, with her grandmother was about mending:

I sit for whole hours without saying anything excepting that I have an old shirt to mend, then, my Grandmr and I have to set our heads together and contrive the most notable way of doing it, which I daresay in the end we always hit upon, but really the contrivance it's self takes up more time than the shirt is worth, our only conversation is about *work, work*

(EY, 10)

Not surprisingly, Dorothy was looked upon as the family seamstress. In the winter of 1797-8 at Alfoxden she made ten shirts for her brother Richard; more, they had to be altered.

It was a great pity that you did not send me an accurate measure of your shirts. Before your letter arrived informing me of the mistake I had made them all but three. I have altered the necks and shall make those which are unfinished wider both in the necks and wrists, but unless you desire it I shall not alter the *wrists* of those which are already done as I think you may be able to get a pair of buttons, with a wide link, that is, set at a distance from each other. This will save a great deal of trouble. If this cannot be done, let me know and I will alter them. You must write to me immediately if you wish to have the wrists altered as I shall probably have an opportunity of sending the shirts by Montagu. William desires his love. Adieu my dear Richard, believe me your affecte Sister

D. Wordsworth

P.S. I received the £5 which you sent me, I thank you for it. I am in very good health at present.

If you wish to have the wrists of your shirts altered pray let me know as it will be very expensive to you to get it done in London. I abided exactly by the measures which you sent, I was so much astonished at its shortness, that I should certainly have written for a second measurement, if I had not so much confidence in your exactness.

(EY, 193-4)

This is a little testy.

And so it went on: the week after they arrived at Dove Cottage in December 1799 Wordsworth wrote to Coleridge:

D. is now sitting by me racked with the tooth-ache. This is a grievous misfortune as she has so much work for her needle among the bedcurtains &c that she is absolutely buried in it.

(EY, 274)

Mending stockings, making her own shifts, making William's waistcoat, a mattress for the white bed, even a pair of shoes for herself... Dorothy sews right through the Journal. In 1804 there were the additional demands of a baby in the house and Charles Lamb sent Dorothy a parcel from London containing, along with oil and magnesia, thread and needles alone to the amount of seventeen shillings (Marrs, II, 138). In 1810 Dorothy thanked Catherine Clarkson for the present of a thimble for Dora, her niece, 'received with rapture. [It] will fit her about six years' hence, but she has two others to wear out in the mean time' (MY, I, 442). The next generation of women were to be in the same predicament. Sewing was a habit. Mary Lamb herself in 1802, when she too no longer needed to sew for money, was clearly still a needlewoman, despite her disclaimer of laziness, 'I am very glad the waistcoats puzzled you', she wrote to Sarah Stoddart,

. . . you were so proud you would not let me do them: I intend when your brother returns to town to offer my services to him for anything he wants in the *mending* way, and that will be a very noble offer for *me* to make, who am you know naturally very lazy.

(Marrs, II, 63)

In November 1814, immediately before writing the article, 'On Needle-Work', Mary wrote to a young friend, Barbara Betham, aged fourteen, recalling Barbara's visit three years before:

How well I remember your quiet steady face bent over your book.  
- One day conscience-struck at having wasted so much of your precious time in reading, and feeling yourself as you prettily said "Quite useless to me" you went to my drawers and hunted out some unhemmed pocket-handkerchiefs, and by no means could I prevail upon you to resume your story-books till you had hemmed them all.

(Marrs, III, 116)

It may have been this memory that stimulated Mary to bring the subject into public discussion.

Having encouraged ladies to abandon sewing for mental exertion, Mary does not continue in her article, as Mary Wollstonecraft would certainly have done, to propose that women should enter the masculine world of jobs, law-copying for example, although 'with very little teaching [they] would soon beat their rivals'. The training would too often be wasted since it was woman's common lot to marry. Thus, Mary Lamb's radical speculation is ultimately not politically resounding; the *status quo* would remain. Only in the area of needlework could change come about if one group of women would help another, either by leaving remunerative sewing to poorer self-supporting women, or, if such sewing simply was positively enjoyed by a lady, she might, in the powerful last words of the article,

. . . give the money so saved to poor needle-women belonging to those branches of employment from which she has borrowed these shares of pleasurable labour.

The lady's alternative, if she insisted on needle-work as pleasure, was to limit herself to the entirely aesthetic from which the needy had always been graciously excused - 'knitting, knotting, netting, carpet-working, and the like ingenious pursuits - those so-often-praised but tedious works'.

Nearly six years after Mary Lamb's unique and passionate excursion into journalism, Dorothy Wordsworth, again in London, and staying with her brother Christopher at Lambeth, was still harrassed by 'work'; she wrote in May 1820:

I had new sets of cloaths (petticoats shifts etc) ready for making . . . these I put into my trunk and thought I should easily get them done here; but I found that London is no place for working, and if I can get Willy's clothes repaired in the holidays it will be as much as I can do, with my own little jobs that are perpetually rising up.

(MY, II, 596)

Willy was Wordsworth's youngest son, and his clothes had to be got ready for Charterhouse, even as his father's more than thirty years before, for Cambridge. Still, Dorothy had time to go 'gazing about the streets, seeing Panoramas - pictures' with Willy, and, again with Willy, she spent one whole day with Miss Lamb. Mrs Clarkson came in another day when Dorothy and Mary Lamb were sitting together and Dorothy, in no very flattering terms, described herself and each of her now middle-aged friends; the three had not seen each other for a decade. Mrs. Clarkson -

looks much better than 11 years ago, and I think, scarcely a day older. She makes no complaint except that she cannot walk much, from uneasiness and swelling in her leg. She tells me I am not so much changed by the want of teeth as she expected; but how this should be I know not: for now my mouth is drawn up to nothing, and my chin projects as far as my nose; but I look healthy enough, though I have lost 8 lbs since I was last weighed, being now only 6 stone 12 lbs: Miss Lamb is quite well and has been so for above a year. She is little altered in the face except from the loss of a tooth, but is sadly too fat; and she dresses so loose that she looks the worse for it and cannot walk so well; yet she is still a very good walker.

(MY, II, 598)

Dorothy had just been to the dentist - 'certainly a delightful operator', she comments generously - to have all her remaining teeth out (8 'including stumps'), and Mary Lamb at the end of May went back with her to get a mould made. By the time Dorothy left for the Continent in July her mouth was complete. In mid-October, after the Alps and Italy, she was in Paris, about to return to London. 'Poor Mary Lamb is again ill. Thus we have lost one of our strongest inducements to linger in London, therefore I think our stay there will not exceed a week' (MY, II, 644), she wrote to Catherine Clarkson. The Wordsworths did in fact stay for two

weeks and saw something of the Lambs, Mary and Dorothy seeing each other probably for the last time. The Wordsworths sent messages in after years and heard news periodically of Mary's being ill. Dorothy wrote the last letter we have from her to Mary Lamb ten years later, in January 1830, and it is as though she is calling over a huge distance. She entreats Mary to get Charles to write:

. . . all communication seems cut off between us; and sincerely and earnestly do we all desire that your Brother will let us have a *post* Letter (no waiting for Franks or private conveyances) telling us minutely, how you live, what you both are doing, and whom you see - of old Friends or new - as visitors by your fireside. I do not ask *you*, Miss Lamb, to write, for I know you dislike the office; but dear Charles L., you whom I have known almost five and thirty years, I trust I do not in vain entreat *you* to let me have the eagerly desired letter at your earliest opportunity, . . . Tell us of all whom you know, in whose well-doing you know us also to be interested; but above all, be very minute in what regards your own dear selves, for there are no persons in the world, exclusive of members of our own Family, of whom we think and talk so frequently, or with such delightful remembrances.

(LY, II, 190)

The reply from Charles does not exist. His next and last letter to Wordsworth was in May 1833 when Mary was again ill: 'half her life she is dead to me, and the other half is made anxious with fears and lookings forward to the next shock' (Lucas, III, 371).

Lamb died the following year, six months after Coleridge; Mary, through Emma Isola's husband, the publisher Edward Moxon, asked Wordsworth in November 1835 to write an epitaph, Wordsworth produced 33 lines immediately, too long already for a tombstone and omitting what Wordsworth called 'the most affecting circumstance of his [Lamb's] life, viz, his faithful and intense love of his Sister' (LY, III, 114). Within a week there were 38 lines and by December Wordsworth was able to add lines about 'the sacred friendship which bound the Brother and sister together' (LY, III, 122), for he was now thinking of the lines as 'a Meditation supposed to be uttered by his Graveside' (*ibid.*). Wordsworth writes of Mary as 'the meek, / The self-restraining, and the ever-kind'; and speaks of the filial tie, even the love of mothers (implying both her early care of Charles and his later life-long care of her) as 'imperishably interwoven

With life itself. Thus mid a shifting world,  
Did they together testify of time  
And season's difference - a double tree  
With two collateral stems sprung from one root;

('Written after the death of Charles Lamb', 91-7)

He might have been speaking of himself and Dorothy. F.S. Cary's portrait of the Lambs, now in the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere (courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery), painted in 1834 and left unfinished at Charles' death, has Mary looking out from the centre, a little old woman with great spaces of darkness about her, Charles seated below her, unsmiling, and in the inkwell on the table, two pens, for both were writers; Wordsworth's



'double tree / With two collateral stems'. (Indeed, Wordsworth even wondered, thinking about the Epitaph, whether 'Miss Lamb herself, if the state of her mind did not disqualify her for the undertaking - [whether] she might probably do it better than any of us' (LY, III, 472).) Mary did not write an epitaph, nor anything but a few letters until the end of her days. Dorothy after 1834 was ill herself and, like Mary Lamb, not in her right mind for long periods: 'a Madman', wrote Dorothy,

might as well attempt to relate the history of his doings and those of his fellows in confinement as I to tell you one hundredth part of what I have felt, suffered and done.

(LY, III, 472)

In this same rare lucid letter of October 1837 Dorothy mentions Thomas Talfourd's recent memorial collection, *The Letters of Charles Lamb*:

I have not seen dear Charles Lamb's Book. His Sister still survives - a solitary twig, patiently enduring the storm of life. In losing her Brother she lost her all - all but the remembrance of him - which cheers her the day through.

(*Ibid*)

Dorothy's solitary twig takes us beyond Wordsworth's 'double tree', image of the Lambs' relationship, to a time almost forty years before to her own first Journal when a brother and sister and their friend shared thoughts and expressions, and Dorothy noticed how 'One only leaf upon the top of a tree - the sole remaining leaf - danced round and round like a rag blown by the wind' (7 March 1798). For her now, a surviving sister is a 'solitary twig patiently enduring the storm of life'. Without Charles, Mary was silent: she could find no fictions to write within. Dorothy's imagination, mainly silent, still spoke occasionally, as in this letter, from its deepest source: her own experience and the natural world.

Both Mary and Dorothy survived their brothers; they valued each other as friends, the world now properly values them as writers. It is perhaps true to say that these things came about because they were their brothers' sisters.

#### ABBREVIATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF WORDSWORTH'S LITERARY CRITICISM

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*Of genius in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature.*

(Wordsworth, *Essay Supplementary to the Preface*)

*My best and favourite aspiration, mounts  
With yearning toward some philosophic song  
Of truth that cherishes our daily life;  
With meditations passionate from deep  
Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse  
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre.*

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1850)

The key two terms in the title of this paper are 'culture' and 'literary criticism' and it is worthwhile to begin with a brief definition of the interrelationship of these two terms in order to determine the proper approach to the forthcoming discourse.

Culture is one of the most complex words common to sociological, political, religious and literary discourses. Its meanings range from the cultivation of mind and spirit to denoting a whole way of life -- material, intellectual and spiritual. Besides, as Eliot has pointed out in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, it has 'different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group or class or of a whole society.' (1)

In literary contexts the use of the word, although it has evolved and developed in different directions, has, on the whole, remained faithful to its dictionary connotation. Some of the figurative meanings of the word, according to the Oxford Dictionary, are: *improvement or refinement by education or training; the training and refinement of mind, tastes and manners; the intellectual side of civilization*. Literary thinkers with a dominant cultural concern developed this figurative connotation to mean, as Arnold put it, acquaintance with 'the best that has been thought and known in the world.' (2) The word 'know' in the above statement should not be misconstrued to refer to mere cognition. Culture is not the product of mere cognitive faculty; it involves the whole being of man, including his feelings and affections. To be more precise, it influences man by working first on his feelings and emotions. I hope I shall not be blamed for mixing categories when I interpret culture thus. It has been interpreted on these lines ever since the concept, with or without the word being actually used, entered literature. In *On the Constitution of the Church and the State*, Coleridge defines the concept as 'the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our humanity.' (3) The idea is amplified in a letter to Wordsworth where Coleridge emphasises the necessity of a general revolution in the modes of developing and disciplining the human mind by the substitution of life and intelligence for the philosophy of mechanism which strikes death everywhere. It was in accord with this

line of thinking that culture was later opposed to mechanization and dehumanization of life by Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, Leavis and others. The emphasis was always laid on the harmonious development of human personality, taking its origin from inward growth. Arnold's classic statement in *Culture and Anarchy* may be taken as representative of the general view of his contemporaries:

Perfection -- as culture from a thorough disinterested study of human nature and human experience learns to conceive of it, -- is a harmonious expansion of all the powers which make the beauty and worth of human nature.

Culture places human perfection in an internal condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality. (5)

The role of culture, Arnold felt, had become 'particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilization is, to a much greater degree than the civilization of Greece and Rome, mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become so'. (6) Culture alone could fill this lifeless and dehumanized world with life and vitality, sweetness and light.

In our day Leavis was the most forceful exponent of the tradition of Arnold. His lament for the passing away of the 'organic community' is essentially a lament for the passing away of the vital and humane rural culture and the main concern of his literary criticism is to see how literature can salvage this dying culture.

If, then, the essence of culture is the humanization and refinement of man, literature is the most effective agency to cultivate it, and to preserve and strengthen it where it already exists; and the most important function of a literary critic is to evaluate literature from this point of view. His structural, formalistic and linguistic analyses are worthwhile only so long as they are directed to this end. No wonder then that the greatest literary critics -- Plato, Aristotle, Dr Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, Leavis, Richards and Eliot -- to confine oneself to the Greek and English traditions only, have all had a predominant cultural concern.

As a critic Wordsworth may not be classed with the greatest but he surely shares with them in common his concern for culture. Culture to him was a continuing spirit represented by what he termed 'the people' in contradistinction to 'the public'. In the *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* (1815) he draws a clear distinction between the two:

Still more lamentable is his error who can believe that there is anything of divine infallibility in the clamour of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE. Towards the PUBLIC, the writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to: but to the People, philosophically characterised, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge, so far as it exists and moves, at the present, faithfully supported by its two wings, the past and the future, his devout respect is due. (7)

To the 'People' Wordsworth always considered himself responsible. He could

never think of poetry apart from its social and cultural obligations. From every word that he wrote, whether of poetry or of criticism, his acute sense of social responsibility is evident. In a letter he wrote:

Every great poet is a teacher. I wish either to be considered a teacher or as nothing. (8)

Poetry, he thought, was one of the most potent weapons of refinement and regeneration for mankind. If a reader of poetry is in 'a healthful state of associations' he 'must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated'. (9) Poetry, from this point of view, is the finest fruit and flower of human knowledge; 'it is the image of man and nature', (10) 'the first and last of all knowledge; it is as immortal as the heart of man'. (11) And the poet is 'the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love'. (12)

As a great literary artist, Wordsworth is not unaware of the fact that poetry is primarily concerned with words but he also knows how 'words communicate attitudes'; how, in his words, 'language and human mind act and react on each other'. (13) Literary art is not to him a jugglery of words. A great literary artist, even as he is dealing with words, knows that his ultimate purpose is the enlightenment and refinement of man. In *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* (1815) he wrote:

... the medium through which, in poetry, the heart is to be affected, is language; a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations. The genius of the poet melts down these to his purpose. (14)

Wordsworth felt that this cultural role of poetry had become more crucial in the modern age of science and technology when mechanization of life was leading to the atrophy of imagination and feeling. This sense of cultural crisis is a predominant theme of his 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' and makes it so crucially relevant to us. It also pervades his other critical treatises -- the *Preface of 1815*, *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* (1815), *Essays on Epitaphs* and *Preface to The Excursion*. In these writings Wordsworth launches a strong protest on behalf of the organic view of life against the abstract materialism of science and against the exclusion of all value from life and matter. Science deals in abstraction and is absorbed so much by the part as to exclude the whole so that it 'misshapes the beauteous forms of things' and 'murder[s] to dissect'. This technological ethos has had a devastating effect on the personality of modern man, deadening his feeling and blunting the discriminating powers of his mind. Voicing his acute sense of this cultural crisis Wordsworth writes in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*:

... the human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know that one being is elevated over another in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so

at the present day. For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. (15)

In analysing the causes of this crisis Wordsworth very perceptively sees the beginnings of 'mass society' and 'mass culture'. Among the causes of this crisis he enumerates 'the accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident'. (16) He is pained to see that 'to this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse'. (17) This is the voice of the prophet of culture, foreshadowing Arnold, Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin, Leavis and T.S. Eliot.

In the revised versions of the *Preface* (1802,1850), the tone of the prophet of culture is further accentuated. The most important additions to the later versions are those dealing with the definition of the poet and of his role in a technological society and Wordsworth's defence of poetry as the best fruit of human knowledge and the most philosophic and universal of all writing. About what a poet is Wordsworth has this to say:

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him. (18)

That is to say he is a man of culture *par excellence* but, Wordsworth goes on to say, he does not rest content with this but imparts this culture to others consistent with his role as 'a man speaking to men'. Wordsworth uses man in the sense of the basic humanity that men share universally in common, be they historians, chemists, mathematicians, physicists or others. It is to this basic humanity that poetry caters and hence a poet is universally needed. He is needed particularly in a society which has been robbed of the poetry of life:

If the labours of the men of science should ever create a material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of objects of science itself. (19)

As a logical corollary to his position Wordsworth recommends the concern for culture as the criterion to evaluate poetry:

In the higher poetry, an enlightened critic chiefly looks for a reflection of the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the Imagination. (20)

Wordsworth's cultural preoccupation will be seen to underlie his views of language and style. He enthusiastically recommends the language of the common men, and amongst them that of the rustics, as a model for the poet. On the face of it, this sounds paradoxical coming, as it does, from a prophet of culture but a close scrutiny reveals it to be in absolute accord with his general theory. For one thing, this is in harmony with the organic view of style which Wordsworth advocates against the view of style as prescriptive which runs counter to the doctrine of sincerity -- an essential ingredient of his theory of culture. For another, Wordsworth's penchant for the language of the common man, is as T.S. Eliot has pointed out in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, a manifestation of the democratic impulse; Wordsworth is taking up cudgels on behalf of the common man's language against the aristocratic side of neo-classicism represented by Dryden's assertion that the best language is that of the king and his courtiers. But why does Wordsworth single out the rustics as the appropriate cultural models? Does he imply, like Rousseau, the admirer of the noble savage, that they are the best embodiments of the kind of culture that he is speaking of? His Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* would seem to argue 'yes':

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer language. (21)

Wordsworth believes that in this state the elementary feelings of human nature are in an unpaired and undefiled condition and in complete harmony with the rhythms of nature and this is reflected in the language they speak:

The language too of these men is adopted ... because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society, and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity they convey their feelings and emotions in simple and unelaborated expressions. (22)

This language is, consequently, more philosophical and of a more permanent value. Here Wordsworth is foreshadowing a major concern of D.H. Lawrence, and Leavis's 'organic community' with its emphasis on rural culture which is distinguished by its commitment to a sincere and uninhibited life.

As Coleridge pointed out in *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter XVII), Wordsworth relies on a degree of 'Education' in his rustics, if only 'by constant reading of the Bible' - in the King James version, of course - not to mention his own sophisticated cultural background. Nor could we, even if we wished, return now to a rural culture. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's basic contention remains valid; that in a materialist and sensationalist society which tends to reduce its people 'to a state of almost savage torpor', 'an enlightened critic' will not indulge in the language of academic or 'social vanity' but will seek out 'in simple and unelaborated expressions' the humanizing and vitalizing works which are 'a reflection of the Wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the Imagination'.

#### NOTES

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13. Preface (1800) in *The Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 120.
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15. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in *The Prose Works*, vol. I, p. 128.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
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19. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
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#### A TRAGEDY REMEMBERED

Berta Lawrence

Two hundred years ago on 20th August an execution was carried out in the parish of Over Stowey, a mile or two from the Nether Stowey cottage where Coleridge came to live seven years later. On September 7th 1789 the Sherborne paper *The Weekly Entertainer* carried an account of the execution of John Walford, a charcoal burner, for the murder of his wife Jane.

This newspaper report described Walford's trial on 18th August before Lord Kenyon in the market town of Bridgwater:

After he was found guilty the judge most sympathetically passed his awful sentence telling him that on Thursday he was to be hanged and his body delivered to the surgeons. Tears trickled down the venerable

cheeks of the humane judge while he endeavoured to awaken him to a sense of his duty. The Court seemed more affected than the prisoner himself, for sullen he first appeared and so remained. The grand jury petitioned for him to be hung in chains near the spot where the murder happened . . . . On Thursday he was taken to the very spot where his wife was found dead, drawn about a quarter of a mile up the hill, and was there executed on a temporary gallows amid perhaps the greatest number of spectators that were ever assembled on the like occasion, supposed to be no less than 3000.

After hanging about 20 minutes he was cut down and fixed in his irons (an iron cage) and then drawn up on a gibbet erected for the purpose to a height of 30 feet where he now remains a horrible spectacle to the whole country! What renders it more distressing is his being fixed within a quarter of a mile of his mother's house. . .

The sympathy and humanity of the Judge and the extent to which the Court was affected at the sentence is strangely out of harmony with the request of the Grand Jury.

After Walford's macabre punishment his body remained suspended for a year, the creaking iron cage turning round in the wind until it loosened and fell. 'No one gave any orders respecting the body . . . it was, as it were, by common consent buried next day ten foot deep beneath the gibbet'.

The oldest local people say that a rotten tree-stump was still visible on the site early in the present century. The place is marked as 'Walford's Gibbet' on the ordnance map. It is situated less than half-a-mile off the A39 Bridgwater-Minehead road on a slope of the Quantock Hills classified as an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Naturally this event, still embedded in folk-memory, made a deep impression on the local community. The story was often re-told, visitors were taken to see the place. Southey in his *Commonplace Book* mentions that on his way to Minehead he went to look at it. In 1797 Tom Poole the self-educated tanner and philanthropist, whose admiration and financial generosity propped up Coleridge, his wife and children, over many years, brought the youthful Coleridge and Wordsworth on a walk from Nether Stowey to Walford's Gibbet. They turned off the main road (the present A39) at the corner near the house still called the Counting House; at that time it was the counting-house of the Stowey copper-mine that Coleridge mentions in a letter sent from Germany in 1799 when he declined to visit a mine at Clausthal. From this corner a steeply climbing narrow road winds up the slope of the hill and along the crest to drop down into the pretty village of Crowcombe. On a radiant sunny day the fettered Walford travelled in a cart up this road, now known as the Coach Road but at that time a rough stony track that Dorothy Wordsworth carelessly called 'The Crookham Way' in her *Alforden Journal*. She wrote that it led to the hill-top where she passed the little muddy pond and the thorn-tree of William's poem *The Thorn*. (The hills are scattered with hawthorns made lopsided by the winds). In Walford's time the road was overhung by oak-trees where today there are beeches and ash trees as well as conifer-plantations. On the right-hand side the Coach Road passes the hill called Dowsborough (called Danesborough locally); its sides are now clothed in scrub-oak, its summit is crowned by an Iron Age camp which is almost certainly the place that Dorothy referred to when she wrote 'Walked to see a fortification'. On the left the road runs alongside Five Lords



Combe, a long green cleft in the hills, couching-place (Dorothy's word) for the red deer, shaded by trees, the bed of a stream. This was the place where Walford pursued his trade and that he looked on from his place of execution. The stream tinkles down the combe to flow across a leafy, lonely lane where Walford's cottage stood.

Near Five Lords Combe Poole told the story that touched his listeners' hearts. They asked him to write it down, which he did at considerable length. In 1809 Coleridge, needing contributions for *The Friend*, had not forgotten it and wrote in effusive terms to Poole: 'Do, do let me have that divine narrative of Robert Walford which of itself stamps you a poet'. Coleridge's original letter carries Poole's correction of the name Robert to John. Poole did not send him the narrative, which remained unpublished until 1833 when it appeared in the *Bath and Bristol Magazine* under the clumsy pen-name Quantockius.

Born, like Poole, in 1765, John Walford earned his living as a charcoal-burner, a hard and lonely metier. Every Monday he carried a loaf and two pounds of cheese to his place of work where his shelter was a conical cabin built of turves and poles. Often drenched with rain he could neither change his clothes nor get a hot meal before he returned to his cottage on Saturday. All week he cut his material in the oakwoods, kept his dome of billets burning, watched it at night, sleeping in 2-hour snatches. Tom Poole remembered that as a boy he once sheltered from rain in Walford's cabin and was lent Walford's jacket. He remembered Walford as a dark bright-eyed young man, immensely strong, attractive to women, very quick-tempered. He fell in love with a gentle girl called Ann Rice, a miller's daughter, but after marriage had been arranged his mother frustrated it. In a sullen mood he responded to the advances of a slatternly stupid woman, who came gathering firewood near his place of work. After the birth of a child he was apprehended by parish officers and married her in June 1789.

It was a brief, wretched marriage, endured in a poor cottage near the stream. The woman Jane was idle and lived much at her mother's, in fear of Walford's temper she said. Walford lived in a state of sullen unhappiness.

On Saturday evening, June 5th, he returned home with his wages, six shillings, to find his wife absent and no meal ready. He ate at a neighbour's. His wife came home at ten o'clock and badgered him for money to buy cider at the inn called the Castle of Comfort. He gave her a shilling and then, after argument, consented to go with her. A full moon lit their path to the main road. At midnight his neighbours, in bed, were terrified by the pad-pad of bare feet passing under their window. This stealthy return seemed sinister.

The Castle of Comfort is now a small, pretty hotel, a low gabled house set alongside the A39 on the Minehead side of the Coach Road with its flowery garden on higher ground. It looks across the road over pastures and ploughed red fields towards the Ivy-clad red ruins of the copper-mine installation. In Walford's day it was a humble inn frequented by labourers, copper-miners, wayfarers, and made a familiar landmark. Dorothy Wordsworth mentions it in her *Alfoxden Journal*. 'The road glittered . . . a violent storm of wind and rain at the Castle of Comfort'. Sometimes she accompanied Coleridge as far as the Castle of Comfort when he walked back from Alfoxden to Stowey.

Early that Sunday morning, June 6th, Thomas Poole (Tom's father) and two

other men were fetched to look on Jane Walford's body lying in a ditch not far from the inn. Later it was established that Walford had tried to throw the body down a mine-shaft. Men summoned the charcoal-burner from his cottage; he came out in an agitated state, wearing his Sunday clothes. His blood-stained working-clothes and his knife were found concealed under his cottage-thatch. He had five shillings of his wages on him. What was considered monstrous was the fact that he had removed the other shilling from his wife's body; it was found in his working-clothes. When accused of the murder he soon confessed, adding 'but it was not fore-intended'.

Taken to Stowey he was sent to Bridgwater to await the Assizes. The jail where he lay on straw stood next door to the pleasant home of Coleridge's liberal-minded friend John Chubb, twice Mayor, prosperous merchant and very competent amateur artist, who in 1807 would entertain Coleridge and young de Quincey in his house.

Condemned at the Assizes Walford made his return journey on Thursday August 20th, seated in a cart with the iron cage beside him, his hands fettered. In Nether Stowey he was given a drink of ale at the George Inn where he wished his friends farewell very bravely at the table although they were aware that his legs trembled. Surrounded by 'peace officers' and accompanied by a crowd he was driven in hot sunshine along his familiar road to a site near the place of his crime where 'the tree had been raised from which he would hang in chains'. The crowd waited holding their breath as he looked down at them.

'Is Ann Rice here?' he asked.

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*The following passage comes from Poole's own narrative.*

'Is Ann Rice here?' was echoed through the concourse of people. Someone said she was back behind the brow of the hill. They went for her and she was dragged up, almost lifeless, to the cart, and as she knelt on the straw he bent down his head over her shoulder. They talked together nearly ten minutes, or rather he talked to her. No one heard what passed. The people, intensely interested, had their eyes fixed on them. He raised up his head for a moment and then bent down, endeavouring to kiss her. The officer held his arm and said, 'You had better not; it can be of no use'. He then snatched her hand and, as she was drawn back, kissed it, some tears for the first time rolling down his cheeks. She was removed, and he, after recollecting himself a few minutes, wiped his face and said 'I am now ready'.

He then joined in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, stood on a board in the cart with the rope round his neck, confessed his guilt in a firm voice and asked for forgiveness. The cap was drawn over his eyes, a handkerchief given him to drop before he leaped.

All were amazed, afraid to breathe, the buzz of the multitude was so hushed that even the twittering of the birds in the neighbouring woods was heard.

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Thirty minutes later the body was put in the cage and raised on the gibbet. For a long time morbid sightseers came to stare. 'For a week he looked asleep', wrote Tom Poole.

Wordsworth could not easily forget this drama of love and crime and punishment played by lowly characters in a place of rural beauty and solitude. In it he found the essential elements for a realistic narrative poem. During the following months at Alfoxden he wrote 400 lines of such a poem that he called *A Somersetshire Tragedy* and left unfinished.

He copied these lines into a notebook containing some of his poems for the *Lyrical Ballads* and gave the notebook to Tom Poole when he left Alfoxden. The girl called Agnes in the poem was Wordsworth's re-creation of Ann Rice.

The fleeting existence of *A Somersetshire Tragedy* would scarcely have been suspected if it were not for a Quantock clergyman, the Rev William Nichols, who in 1891 wrote a book *The Quantocks and their Associations* in which he told that he discovered these 400 lines when he bought the notebook after Poole's death. They were written in Dorothy Wordsworth's hand. Most unluckily he did not transcribe even a fragment. Apparently he did mean to publish the poem but his brother who inherited the notebook decided against publication. He sold the notebook to Gordon Wordsworth, the poet's grandson, who was sufficiently misguided to cut out all the appropriate pages from the notebook. The mutilated notebook is in the Wordsworth Museum at Grasmere. The reason for such actions can only be Victorian prudery that considered this particular poem, based on a tale of crime and seduction, too sordid for readers of Wordsworth's poetry.

Did Wordsworth, in 1798, re-touch his long poem *Salisbury Plain (Guilt or Sorrow)*? Is there an echo of the Walford story in its closing lines about the murderer's fate?

'His fate was pitied. Him in iron case  
(Reader, forgive the intolerable thought)  
They hung not - no one on his form or face  
Could gaze, as on a show by idlers sought'.

#### NOTE:

The Rev. Wm. Nichols lived in the handsome white house called Woodlands, set in a park near a tree-shaded stretch of the A39 leading to Holford, the village where Alfoxden is situated. This house Woodlands is mentioned several times in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal*, 1798. A few years later John Kenyon, cousin of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, lived there.

An opera *The Charcoal Burner* was broadcast in 1969 on Radio 3. Based on Walford's story, the libretto was written by Edwin Morgan. The music was composed by Thomas Wilson.

#### BOOK REVIEWS

Claude A. Prance, *E.V. Lucas and His Books*. Locust Hill Press, P.O. Box 260, West Cornwall, CT 06796, 1988. \$35.

Our long-standing member Mr. Claude A. Prance, to whom we are already deeply indebted for his *Companion to Charles Lamb* and, with Frank P. Riga, *Index to the London Magazine* has now produced *E.V. Lucas and his Books*. The main part of the book is bibliographical in character, providing a chronological list of Lucas's books and pamphlets, his contributions to periodicals, books about him and his work, as well as alphabetical lists and Appendices,

including one of *Charles Lamb Bulletin* entries mentioning him. Mr. Prance prefaces all this with a delightful Introduction on Lucas's life and work.

Despite their being members of the Society of Friends (hence *Bernard Barton and his Friends* and *Charles Lamb and the Lloyds*), his parents did not leave him long at the Quaker schools he attended, Ackworth and Saffron Waldon, or indeed at any others. In six years he seems to have been to eleven schools: Mr Prance reports him as saying, this was 'not conducive to solid learning'! At the age of sixteen he was apprenticed to a Brighton bookseller, who also had a circulating library, and with the aid of this and of his home background he became very well-read despite his interrupted schooling. Later he attended lectures in English at University College, London, and built up a career as a highly successful journalist and writer, as well as, after a long association with the firm, becoming in 1924 Chairman of the Board of Directors of the publishers Methuen. He received Honorary Doctorates from St. Andrews and Oxford and was made a Companion of Honour. Mr Prance says that 'excluding popular novelists and playwrights, Lucas was probably the most successful literary man of his day'. It is indeed impressive how often and how quickly, sometimes within a month or two of their first publication, his books were reprinted.

He wrote on many subjects but is probably best remembered now, apart from his editing of Lamb, for his 'humanized guide books', the 'Wanderer' series and *Highways and Byways in Sussex*, his essays and his writings on cricket. My father, having no son to take to cricket matches as his father did, made the best of it and took me. Whether to Old Trafford or the village pitch two fields away, unprotesting I went. How I wish we could have seen those hilarious-sounding matches, in which Lucas played for J.M. Barrie's team, which also included Conan Doyle and which was more distinguished for the literary or artistic merit of its players than for their sporting talent! But Elians will be waiting for this: Mr Prance says that 'in 1900 Methuens commissioned him to produce a new edition of *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb* and, in spite of much other work and the enormous amount of research needed the first of the seven volumes appeared in 1903 and the last in 1905', to be followed in 1935 by a new three volume edition of the Letters. Despite 'minor inaccuracies in the text'; for which, as Mr Prance points out, Lucas could not always be blamed - for example, 'he could not see the originals of all the letters quoted' - how invaluable these volumes have been to all of us and how fortunate that the notes were compiled when Lucas could actually consult with someone nearer to Lamb's time, such as Bernard Barton's daughter in her old age, by then the widow of Edward Fitzgerald. The two-volume *Life of Charles Lamb*, published in 1905, 'allowing Lamb's own words to tell much of the story' was, as Mr Prance says, 'remarkably successful' and who could disagree with him that 'The first volume contains what is really one of his best essays, the chapter on Lamb's friend George Dyer, "with a head uniformly wrong, and a heart uniformly right"'. How *could* John Gross speak of 'E.V.Lucas's overgrown biography of Charles Lamb?'. Some of us would not part with a word of it.

But, of course, we must acknowledge that we are biased. Both Lamb and Lucas are, among the many unfashionable to-day. If Lamb is beginning to be respected again by discerning readers who can detect quality when they see it, regardless of trendiness, who now reads E.V.Lucas? In an age when even humour has to be black and writers are praised for taking out their sadistic impulses on their characters, such words as Mr Prance uses of Lucas's literary personality, 'light, charming and kindly', tend to be pejorative.

Neither Lamb nor Lucas were strangers to the dark side of life and each had his own way of dealing with it. Lucas said, 'this is why almost all my writings have been concerned with pleasant things, and why I have laid so much emphasis on what I found to be beautiful or worthy of honour'. Surely we do need to be reminded of what is easy to forget in a world whose emphasis is quite the other way. Perhaps it is not mere escapism if we choose sometimes to 'think on these things'. Such are the negative associations now with these expressions that they immediately raise a satirical smile, but, reading this book, one remembers a period when sport was 'sporting' and not an ill-natured scrap for money, when dirty tricks instead of being admired as clever could be regarded as 'not cricket' and when people could enjoy 'whatsoever things are lovely' without fear of being despised. How splendid too, though modern editing may be more rigorous, that Lucas could edit the works of Charles and Mary Lamb because he liked them and wanted to, not as academic one-up-man-ship or to secure tenure! Mr Prance says of Lucas, 'there is no good reason why many readers should not find his books equally attractive to-day, even though tastes have changed'.

Yet, of all the more than two hundred books for which 'Lucas was responsible, as author, editor or introducer', Mr. Prance says, 'there do not seem to be any of Lucas's books in print in the United Kingdom at present'. But don't despair. As too often, I fear, the United States put us to shame: 'in the U.S.A. nearly forty of his volumes are listed in Bowker's *Books in Print 1986-87*'. Let us hope that Mr Prance's excellent work in *E.V. Lucas and His Books* will inspire a renaissance over here.

Mary Wedd

#### SOCIETY NOTES AND NEWS FROM MEMBERS

##### IN MEMORY OF COLERIDGE: A News Item

On the afternoon of 16th February a short commemorative ceremony centred on Coleridge was performed at Christ Church, the Unitarian church of Bridgwater, Somerset. This church, admired by Defoe, is one of the town's finest buildings, built of red brick with a shell hood over the door. It was built in 1688 to replace a sacked and damaged Presbyterian meeting-house; its licence permitting public worship was granted in 1689.

Here youthful Coleridge preached several times for his friend, the minister the Rev. John Howel, after walking eight miles from Nether Stowey. He recorded two definite dates in his letters. The ceremony that took place on 16th February this year was the unveiling of a plaque, on the church's outside wall, that commemorated Coleridge's connection with this church. The inscription, in gold lettering on a black background, reads

The Poet  
Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
Preached in this Church  
Sunday 4th June 1797  
and Sunday 7th January 1798

This plaque, made by the firm 'Signs of the Times' of Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, was presented by an anonymous donor through the Bridgwater & District Civic Society. It was unveiled by Lady Gass in the presence of the minister, the Rev. Rod Dixon who said the prayer of dedication, Mrs. Clare Sealey, the church secretary (whose family is prominent in the church records of Coleridge's time), Mrs Julie Hooper vice-Chairman of Sedgemoor District Council, Councillor Trevor Donaldson Mayor of Bridgwater, Mr. John Allen, vice-Chairman of the Bridgwater Arts Centre, a National Trust representative and the chairman of the Nether Stowey Coleridge Association.

Lady Gass is a daughter of the Acland Hood family and directly connected with the Mr. Acland of Fairfield (the family house) who was known to Coleridge through Tom Poole and to whom he sent a 'prospectus' for *The Friend*. Mrs Coleridge too, in a letter from Bristol to Tom Poole, refers to a visit she made to Mrs Acland and her baby at Fairfield.

Inside the church, beautified with spring flowers, a reproduction of Coleridge's portrait by Van Dyke the younger was prominently displayed. Afterwards there was a short organ recital of music by Jeremiah Clarke, Purcell and others; altogether this was a pleasing, graceful occasion to honour an association with a great poet. Only by chance did the event take place in the year of the church's tercentenary which is to be celebrated by several events in the church, among them a day of poetry reading and talks devoted to Coleridge under the aegis of the Nether Stowey Coleridge Association.

The Rev John Howel's salary was under £50. After his death Coleridge's friend, the distinguished Dr Toulmin, in whose Unitarian church at Taunton Coleridge preached during his Nether Stowey years, tried, while living in Birmingham, to find a replacement. He suggested two Shropshire ministers as candidates; Mr Jenkins of Whitchurch, mentioned by Hazlitt, and Hazlitt's father, minister at Wem, 'a man of superior intelligence who has seen much of the world'. Neither accepted because of the low remuneration.

Members of this Bridgwater church have included to this day members of the Blake family to which the great admiral belonged (his reputed birth place is quite close). Another member was Captain Lewis Browne, one of Nelson's signal officers.

Berta Lawrence

#### TWO NOTES ON BOOKS

Readers of the *Bulletin* will be interested to know that in addition to the essays mentioned, and the authors treated, in Donald H. Reiman's *Romantic Texts and Contexts*, which was reviewed in our January issue, the volume also provides a welcome reissue of the essay 'Thematic Unity in Lamb's Familiar Essays' which played a notable part in stimulating new thinking about Charles Lamb's work in the 1960s, when the current critical reawakening to his excellence was only just beginning. Until now it has been necessary to seek out the article in the 1965 volume of the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, which generally requires access to a

university library. We welcome the essay's reappearance in a more accessible format. It is to be wished that others of the half dozen or so American essays on Lamb which broke new ground in the 1960s and early '70s could also be made available to the general reader.

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Professor John I. Ades of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville is bringing out a volume of what he describes as 'sketches' (one of which has appeared in the *Bulletin*) from the Fithian Press, Santa Barbara, California, this month. Winifred Courtney's description of the book and its author is so full of verve that it demands quotation:

"Naval platoon leader, chessplayer, animal lover, bicyclist, Professor of English, authority on the Bible, on Charles Lamb, amateur preacher, journalist, humorist, baseball and tennis enthusiast, gardener, musician and music critic, son, father, husband, student of American stalwarts and eccentrics; stickler for grammar, clarity, solid sense - and nonsense: how many things can a writer *be* all at once? John Ades is all of these and a total delight to read in these reminiscent sketches . . . Is it his warm humorous heart that captures? - or his firm grasp of what is worthwhile in anyone's life? Reader, whoever you are, I recommend him".

MR. PRAHBAT MATHUR is a Lecturer in English at M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad, India and is pursuing a Ph.D. course under the supervision of Dr. M. Trikha, Reader in English, Institute of Advanced Studies, Meerut University. He has chosen for his thesis 'Dramatization of "self" in the works of Charles Lamb'.

He is experiencing some difficulty in obtaining background material. In particular he would like to purchase copies of Lucas' *Life of Charles Lamb* and Prance's *Companion to Charles Lamb*, and would no doubt be glad to hear from members of the CLS who can assist him in his researches.

Anyone who can help is asked to write to Mr. Mathur direct:-

M.M.H. College campus,  
Ghaziabad, 201001  
U.P. INDIA.

NEW MEMBER

Dr. Kathryn Sutherland, Department of English, The University, Manchester,  
M13 9PL.

## IN THE SALEROOM

An article in *The Observer* of May 7, 1989, records the recent discovery among other manuscripts at the premises of Messrs. Novello, music publishers, of 'Probably the most valuable, and certainly the most interesting, autograph album in the world'. It belonged to Vincent Novello (1781-1861) the founder of the firm, and in addition to manuscript material by Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini and other composers it contains 'an autograph poem by Charles Lamb, written after attending one of the Novellos' musical evenings.' This proves to be one of the versions of the amusing 'Free Thoughts on Several Eminent Composers' ('Some cry up Haydn, some Mozart') in which Lamb confesses that 'I care no more for Cimarosa/Than he did for Salvator Rosa': in other words that he was as good as tone deaf. Vincent Novello's album was to be auctioned at Phillips on 14 June. The price anticipated was £50-60,000.

## FOR THE RECORD

Some time ago members made a long and fruitless search to try to answer an enquiry about the source of the Elian quotation 'As now our stout triumvirs sweep the streets'.

During 1988 I bought Mr Derek Pepys-Whiteley's extra-illustrated copy (No. 46 of 600 and inscribed to Hugh Macnaghten 'from the Authorp /sic/) of Sir F.D. MacKinnon's 1927 edition of *The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple*.

It is heavily annotated in manuscript, perhaps by the Editor. The printed Textual Notes suggest that the quotation is an invented one and this has been added as a manuscript marginal note to the Introduction.

I assumed that the quotation had something to do with working class democracy, rather like Abel Evans' *Epiogram - On Doctor Tadlow*:

'When Tadlow walks the streets, the pavours cry,  
"God bless you, Sir!" and lay their rammers by.'

It seems, however, that it refers to people walking abreast, linked arm in arm.

D.E. Wickham

## SUBSCRIPTION REMINDER

Subscriptions for 1989 were due in January, but will still be received in the true spirit of Elian friendship by the Hon. Treasurer, Nicholas Powell at 30 Camberwell Grove, London, S.E.5. The rates remain unchanged as follows:

U.K. Members	Singles	£8
	Doubles	£12
	Institutions	£12
Overseas	Individuals	\$14
	Institutions	\$21