

# Sidelights on Charles Lamb

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## 1. Love for Dramas and Pictures

Lamb was very fond of dramas. He loved the dramatists of the 17th century. This resulted in the *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*. He himself wrote four plays : *John Woodvil*, *Mr. H.*, — the *Pawnbroker's Daughter*, and the *Wife's Trial*. All of these were failures, but we can tell how much he liked dramas from this fact. Lamb first intended to be a poet, but he gave up the hope. Next he wished to be a dramatic writer, with great expectations, but in this ambition he also failed, but his interest in dramas, especially in Elizabethan literature, materialized itself in the *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, which not only served to establish his name as a critic, but also roused the public interest in the dramatic literature of this age.

In the *Essays of Elia*,<sup>\*</sup> essays connected with dramas or dramatic performances are *My First Play*, *On Some of the Old Actors*, *On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*, *Stage Illusion*, *To the Shade of Elliston*, *Ellistoniana*, *Barbara S.*—, *Old China*.

Of these, *My First Play* and *Old China* (in a part of it) are only the description of the theatre-going experiences presented in a contrasted form of the first play and the next ones or of the past and the

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\* There are many pieces which are not included in the Essays but belong to the same category. See Lucas, *Works Vol.* 1

present experiences. In the rest of them we can find his valuation and enjoyment of the plays or theatrical performances of various actors and actresses of the times.

In *On Some of the Old Actors* the characteristic features of old actors are described with keen insight and close observation without losing due sympathy for them. For example, how subtle and cogent his remarks on Mrs. Jordan are : —

“There is no giving an account how she delivered the disguised story of her love for Orsino. It was no set speech, that she had foreseen, so as to weave it into an harmonious period, line necessarily following line, to make up the music — yet I have heard it so spoken, or rather *read*, not without its grace and beauty — but when, she had declared her sister’s history to be a ‘blank’, and that she ‘never told her love’, there was a pause, as if the story had ended — and then the image of the ‘worm in the bud’ came up as a new suggestion — and the heightened image of ‘Patience’ still followed after that, as by some growing (and not mechanical) process, thought springing up after thought, I would almost say, as they were watered by her tears.”

Lamb knows what to criticize. He does not persuade others to conform to his opinion, but tell his appreciation of the character and situation which is very convincing in an insinuating way. But it is his power of impersonation which brings out a deep and sympathetic understanding of the object in view. This power of impersonation, however, is impossible without a strong power of imagination. Lamb was richly blessed with this faculty. Hence his unique criticism.

Bensley seems to have excelled in Malvolio. Naturally Lamb

describes him in this character and praises him, for Lamb always takes things by the better handle, especially the past things. To him defunct merit always comes strangely.

"You could see the first dawn of an idea stealing slowly over his countenance, climbing up by little and little, with a painful process, till it cleared up at last to the fulness of a twilight conception — its highest meridian. He seemed to keep back his intellect, as some have had the power to retard their pulsation. The balloon takes less time in filling, than it took to cover the expansion of his broad moony face over all its quarters with expression. A glimmer of understanding would appear in a corner of his eye, and for lack of fuel go out again. A part of his forehead would catch a little intelligence, and be a long time in communicating it to the remainder."

Lamb excels in this kind of character sketches. This manner of writing reminds us of those in the *South-Sea House* and others in which various uses of metaphoric expressions vivid in images make us feel as if we were seeing them on the stage. In the above passage the detailed and lengthy description of the weakness of intellect is in proportion to its actuality and therefore the comicality is redoubled.

In *On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century*, Lamb complains of the extinction of Comedy of manners. He did not like to see the reality of life brought on the stage in comedy, for the happy breathing-place from the burthen of a perpetual moral questioning, was what he aimed at in comedy.

"I confess for myself that (with no great delinquencies to answer) for I am glad for a season to take an airing beyond the

diocese of the strict conscience, — not to live always in the precincts of the law-courts, — but now and then, for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions — to get into recesses, whither the hunter cannot follow me—

—— Secret shades

Of woody Ida's inmost grove,

While yet there was no fear of Jove —

I come back to my cage and my restraint the fresher and more healthy for it. I wear my shackles more contentedly for having respired the breath of an imaginary freedom. ....because in a modern play I am to judge of the right and the wrong. The standard of *police* is the measure of *political justice*. The atmosphere will blight it, it cannot live here. It has got into a moral world, where it has no business, from which it must needs fall headlong; as dizzy, and incapable of making a stand, as a Swedenborgian bad spirit that has wandered unware into the sphere of one of his Good Men, or Angels."

Such a view which considers the absence of morality in comedy necessarily called forth the opposition of Lord Macaulay, who, in his review of Leigh Hunt's edition of the Dramatic works of Wycherey, Congreve, etc., in 1840, opposed thus:—

"In the name of art, as well as in the name of virtue, we protest against the principle that the world of pure comedy is one into which no moral enters. If comedy be an imitation, under whatever conventions, of real life, how is it possible that it can have no reference to the great rule which directs life, and to feelings which are called forth by every incident of life? If what Mr. Charles Lamb says were correct, the inference would be that

these dramatists did not in the least understand the very first principles of their craft. Pure landscape-printing into which no light or shade enters, pure portrait pointing into which no expression enters, are phrases less at variance with sound criticism than pure comedy into which no moral enters."

This is quite true and, as Macaulay says, there is no world where no morality enters. So Lamb's opinion seems to be quite mistaken, but I believe this comes from the difference of the standpoints of the two. Lamb considers morality from the point of view of the audience and Macaulay from that of the play itself. From that latter point of view Macaulay is right, and we cannot find any play that does not contain moral elements, but what Lamb means by morality is in connection with the audience. Lamb, as he says, wishes to have a world where one can enjoy the stage performances to unbend and relax the mind and body of the spectator, so what Lamb says in connection with morality is from the side of the spectator. When the object of the play is for innocent laughter, for purely physical and mental recreation and unbending, we are not particular whether it is moral or immoral.

When the tacit understanding of the actors and the audience is based on this laughter, any absurdities or immoral actions on the stage do not call forth any moral complaint but laughter, and by this innocent cachination it might be said we are rather morally strengthened to that extent. What Lamb means by the absence of morality is, I believe, this. So after all the difference of the standpoints in regard to morality is the cause of Macaulay's opposition to Lamb's complaint of the contemporary comedy.

In *On the Acting of Munden* Lamb gives Munden a copious encomium

for his versatility on the stage.

"There is one face of Farley, one face of Knight, one (but what a one it is! ) of Liston; but Munden has none that you can properly pin down, and call *his*. When you think he has exhausted his battery of looks, in unaccountable warfare with your gravity, suddenly he sprouts out an entirely new set of features, like Hydra. He is not one, but legion."

Naturally come the witty words:—

"O for the power of the pencil to have fixed them when I awoke! A season or two since there was exhibited a Hogarth gallery. In richness and variety the latter would not fall far short of the former."

In the *Stage Illusion*, the psychological analysis of the reason why the actuality of life and its imitative reproduction on the stage produce a difficult sensation in comedy is given in the form of a tacit understanding between an actor and his audience.

'The most mortifying infirmity in human nature, to feet in ourselves, or to contemplate in another, is, perhaps, cowardice. To see a coward *done to the life* upon a stage would produce anything but mirth. Yet we most of us remember Jack Bannister's cowards. Could any thing be more agreeable, more pleasant? We loved the rogues. How was this effected but by the exquisite art of the actor in a perpetual sub-insinuation to us, the spectators, even in the extremity of the shaking fit, that he was not half such a coward as we took him for?"

Thus all the symptoms of cowardice, such as the quivering lip, the cowering knees, the teeth chattering, are taken simply for imitations nor originals, and all these actions signifying cowardice are connived

at for the greater pleasure. This is Lamb's analysis of the absence of the unpleasant sensation at the sight of the staged moral defect.

This view is closely connected with Lamb's suggestion of the absence of morality, given above. The connivance of vice on the part of the audience is the same thing as the absence of it in so far as they are concerned, but vice itself exists on the stage.

Anyhow, this psychological analysis of the stage illusion in terms of the connection between the actor and the audience is very interesting when no one seems to have attempted such analysis before. Lamb's subtle intuition, keen observation and high intelligence caused him to have such a psychological interpretation.

*To the Shade of Elliston* is fanciful and fantastical. Lamb's imagination pictures Elliston as a historionic ghost going down to Pluto's kingdom. The description is elaborate and whimsical.

"It irks me to think, that, stript of they regalities, thou shouldst ferry over, a poor forked shade, in crazy Stygian wherry. Methinks I hear the old boatman, paddling by the weedy wharf, with raucid voice, bawling "SCULLS, SCULLS : " to which, with waving hand, and majestic action, thou deignest no reply, other than in two curt monosyllables, "No; : OARS."

This manner of fanciful writing may be associated with that of Robert Burton.

In *Ellistonian* Lamb extols the simple devotion of Elliston to his dramatic art, whether he was on the stage or not. In the following we see Lamb's shrewdness in discovering the difference in meaning in the order of the words "on" and "off".

" 'I like Wrench', a friend was saying to him one day, 'because

he is the same natural, easy creature, on the stage, that he is off', 'My case exactly', retorted Elliston— with a charming forgetfulness, that the converse of a proposition does not always lead to the same conclusion — 'I am the same person *off* the stage that I am *on*', The inference, at first sight, seems identical; but examine it a little, and it confesses only, that the one performer was never, and the other always, *acting*."

'Lamb hated a lukewarm artist'. To him devotion, simple sincerity, was the most important thing in this world. He detested the half-heartedness in everything. This is clearly observed in *Mrs. Battle's Opinion on Whist*, where Lamb praises the whole-hearted devotion of Mrs. Battle on the game of whist. *Basho*, a famous *haiku* composer in Japan emphasized the necessity of the same thought by saying that those who wish to attain mastery in any art or craft must stick to it without any lukewarm attitude. Elliston was the same person *off* the stage as *on* it.

"And in truth this was the charm of Elliston's private deportment. You had a spirited performance always going on before your eyes, with nothing to pay. As where a monarch takes up his casual abode for a night, the poorest hovel which he honors by his sleeping in it, becomes *ipso facto* for that time a palace ; so wherever Elliston waked, sate, or stood still, there was the theater. He carried about with him his pit, boxes and galleries, and set up his portable playhouse at corners of streets, and in the market-places".\*

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\* This description reminds me of the character sketch of Captain Jackson in the essay bearing this name as its title. Lamb may have been partially suggested by the character of Elliston in his description of Captain Jackson.



It is interesting to find in Japan the instance of this simple devotion to historionic art *off* the stage as well as *on* it. A famous actor called Utaemon Nakamura, who acted a female part, once said while seeing the snow on the the earth, "It's quite like sugar, is'nt it?, with a feminine gesture and tone. Utaemon Nakamura, completely transformed both in action and thought into a female, could not help associating snow in its white softness with sugar, a favourite with woman and children. Elliston was the same. His fevour and enthusiasm caused him without any conscious will on his part to assume the character on the stage. He was an actor to the marrow as Utaemon Nakamura was. The same fervour and sincerity marked George Dyer, an eccentric friend of Lamb's, and caused the latter to make fine character sketches of the former twice : in *Oxford in the Vacation*, and *Amicus Redivivus*, thus making this quaint character a permanent figure in English literature.

The essay entitled *On the Tragedies of Shakspeare Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation* is not contained in the *Essays of Elia*, but it is very important as a criticism of Shakespeare's dramas. In it Lamb first corrects the mistaken notion of the general people who considered an actor that please the town in any of the characters of Shakespeare to possess a *mind congenial with the poets*, and then proceed to say that Shakespeare's plays are not fitted for the stage. He says thus :—

"It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakspeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguished 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"

To Lamb's strong imagination Shakespeare's characters seemed to have more than the actor could express, for in Shakespeare's dramas, as in all his best ones, the form of *speaking* is a *medium*, to bring the reader or spectator into "the inner structure and working of mind in a character, which he could otherwise never have arrived at *in that form of composition* by any gift short of intuition". In imagination one can reach the highest Heaven and the lowest bottom of the Hell, if the faculty is powerful, and to Lamb's eyes, the stage representations of Shakespeare's tragical characters were very poor counterparts of the original. Lear on the stage was to him "nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage." So Lear was "essentially impossible to be represented on a stage" to Lamb. One might say this argument is carried to excess, but so far as Lear is concerned, I believe his dictum is quite true. Who could imitate the torrential rage of Lear which is identified with the furies of the element?

Lamb also loved pictures. He was the best appreciator of Hogarth. Lamb was the first person to detect the best and most serious feelings, the heart of man, in Hogarth's pictures which had been considered so far to be simply the expression of the comical element. Here we see his keen originality in the appreciation of the pictorial art. In the *Essays of Elia* we find the essay entitled *Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Production of Modern Art*, in which several pictures are discussed in Lamb's own way. It is said that Lamb took the picture that suited for his object in view, and there may have been other pictures that nullified Lamb's charge, but his subtle

and keen insight into the pictures he took up in this essay is undeniable. It makes him go far deeper into the essence of the object and see what ordinary people fail to detect. His comment on Raphael's *Adam and Eve* is a good instance of it. It is the presentation of the new-born Eve to Adam by the Almighty.

Lamb's keen observation is attracted by the expression of Adam.

"A tolerably modern artist would have been satisfied with tempering certain raptures of connubial anticipation, with a suitable acknowledgement to the Giver of the blessing, in the countenance of the first bridegroom; something like the divided attention of the child (Adam was here a child man) between the given toy, and the mother who had just blest it with the bauble. This is the obvious, the first-sight view, the superficial. An artist of a higher grade, considering the awful presence they were in, would have taken care to subtract something from the expression of the more human passion, and to heighten the more spiritual one. This would be as much as an exhibition-goer, from the opening of Somerset House to last year's show, has been encouraged to look for. It is obvious to hint at a lower expression, yet in a picture, that for respects of drawing and colouring, might be deemed not wholly inadmissible within these art-fostering walls, in which the raptures should be as ninety-nine, the gratitude as one, or perhaps Zero! By neither the one passion nor the other has Raphael expounded the situation of Adam. Singly upon his brow sits the absorbing sense of wonder at the created miracle. The *moment* is seized by the intuitive artist, perhaps not self-conscious of his art, in which neither of the conflicting emotions — a moment how abstracted — have had time to spring up, or to battle for

indecorous mastery."

Lamb's criticism of the "Balthazar's Feast" may be right, when he says that since no mention of the participation of any one present in the sight of the hand that appeared on the wall except the king, it is unreasonable that we should see here the needless multiplication of the miracle, the participation of a thousand courtiers' in the fright, but what he says about Othello's colour seems to be carried to excess. His words about Othello are as follows : —

"Artists again err in the confounding of *poetic* with *pictorial objects*. In the latter, the exterior accidents are nearly everything, the unseen qualities as nothing. Othello's colour — the infirmities and corpulence of a Sir John Falstaff — do they haunt us perpetually in the reading? Or are they obtruded upon our conceptions one time for ninety-nine that we are lost in admiration at the respective moral or intellectual attributes of the character? But in a picture Othello is *always* a Blackmoor ; and the other only plump Jack."

In the discussion of the preceeding two pictures Lamb places himself in the position of the persons painted in the pictures, but in the case of Othello's picture he criticizes it from his subjective point of view. Here we find the discrepancy of his critical attitude towards pictures, but still the keenness of his observation gives us something to meditate on. We may say he is the precursor of modern painting that lays emphasis upon the subjective view of the artist in the materialization of his artistic conception.

## 2 Lamb and Mary

Mary was in one sense the most unfortunate person in the Lamb family. She was gentle, warm-hearted, wise and loved her mother with great devotion, but her filial affection was lost upon her mother. Thus her loneliness and the heaviness of the burden that rested upon her shoulder reached the breaking point at last and crushed her mind. Consequently came the family tragedy of which she was the cause. From this point of view one might call her the most unfortunate woman in her family, but when we think that because of this tragedy she could enjoy the closest intimacy with her brother under his self-sacrificing care she might be called the most fortunate person. If she had not gone mad, she might have lived a common wife, without writing anything, and Lamb also may have failed to create his Essays, the reflection of their life fatedly locked together in double singleness. This double unity produced a singular kind of flower of immaculate beauty with morbid fragrance. They passed a life of double celibacy of brother and sister, but their relations were something more than that of the ordinary brother and sister in that their life was always threatened with the overhanging cloud of insanity, which obliged them to change their abodes very often as "marked people." These special circumstances bound them closer to each other than the ordinary cases did. Mutual pity and sympathy tied them closer than an ordinary married could expect. Therefore their "dual loneliness" was in my view not dual loneliness, but dual happiness.

This dual happiness made it possible for them to walk in arm in arm like lovers to the wonder and surprise of Godwin. They

believed that the only persons that could understand them, that could enter into the deepest recesses of their hearts, were after all no other than they themselves. But when we consider the depth of their mutual love and affection, we cannot say that Lamb's love for his sister was more than her love for her brother. With her finer and more delicate sentiments peculiar to the feminine sex, she always wrapped him up with downy softness, which sometimes amounted even to morbidity since she knew very well how much she owed to her brother, and Lamb, of course, requited for this tender devotion with equal intensity. But her sheer devotion to him, which made her an unconscious combination of mother, sister, and lover, that is the over-dispensation of this dose of affection often suffocated him and led him to rebel against her, wishing to get freer air, more breathing space. Naturally come the words of Mary, "I have no power over Charles; he will do what he will do. But I ought to have some little influence over myself; and therefore, I am most manfully resolving to turn over a new leaf with my own mind." (to Sarah Stoddart, March, 14 1806) but the dissipation of this mood brought about his contrition, his pang of remorse. It was especially strong when he was left alone with his sister in mental obscurity. Then he keenly felt what Mary was to him. The following words in the letter given to Miss Wordsworth (June 14 1805) show it: —

"Meantime she is dead to me, and I miss a prop. All my strength is gone, and I am like a fool, bereft of her co-operation. I dare not think, lest I should think wrong; so used am I to look up to her in the least and the biggest perplexity. To say all that I know of her would be more than I think any body could believe, or even understand; and when I hope to have her well again with

me, it would be sinning against her feelings to go about to praise her; for I can conceal nothing that I do from her. She is older and wiser and better than I, and all my wretched imperfections I cover to myself by resolutely thinking on her goodness. She would share life and death, heaven and hell, with me. She lives but for me; and I know I have been wasting and teasing her life for five years past incessantly with my cursed drinking and ways of going on. But even in this upbraiding of myself I am offending against her, for I know that she was cleaved to me for better, for worse; and if the balance has been against her hitherto, it was a noble trade."

The same pang of remorse is also shown in other letters. With<sup>2</sup>a ceaseless repetition of this alternating mood of devotion and resistance, he lived with his sister, generally in good concord with occasional differences. Their life is finely described in the *Mackery End in Hertfordshire*.

"Brdget Elia has been my housekeeper for many a long year. I have obligations to Bridget, extending beyond the period of memory. We house together, old bachelor and maid, in a sort of double singleness; with such tolerable comfort, upon the whole, that I, for me, find myself no sort of disposition, to go out upon the mountains, with the rash king's offspring, to bewail my celibacy. We agree pretty well in our tastes and habits — yet so, as "with a difference". We are generally in harmony, with occasional bickerings — as it should be among near relations. Our sympathies are rather understood, than expressed; and once, upon my dissembling a tone in my voice more kind than ordinary, my cousin burst into tears, and complained that I was altered."

Next comes the description of the difference in their tastes and habits. By contrasting his tastes with hers, Elia shows the discordant harmony between them. Elia loves, as he states elsewhere, such quaint writers as Burton, with his out-of-the-way humours and opinions. The quaintness and oddities of authors are what please him, and simple narrative, mere fluctuations of fortune, give no relish to him, while Bridget "hold nature more clever". She does not love anything that is odd or quaint; she likes the story full of excitement and shifting scenes, which shows that her taste is normal. Elia softly impeaches her for her disrelish of his favourite writers.

"I can pardon her blindness to the beautiful obliquities of the *Religio Medici*; but she must apologise to me for certain disrespectful insinuations, which she has been pleased to throw out latterly, touching the intellectuals of a dear favourite of mine, of the last century but one — that thrice noble, chaste, and virtuous, — but again somewhat fantastical, and original-brained, generous Margaret Newcastle."

Bridget, however, has her redeeming points. Whenever hot a argument arises as to some moral points, she is always in the right, though in matters of facts, dates, and circumstances, she is usually in the wrong, and Elia is right.

Elia's delicacy of sentiments and subtlety of touches produce an honest picture of Bridget with both her merits and demerits, always comparing them with his. But the close observation of the description of both sides of Bridget will show that when her foibles are given, her redeeming points, are always given in good contrast to them. When compared to these redeeming points, her foibles are mere trifles, almost nothing.



"She hath an awkward trick (to say no worse of it) of reading in company : at which times she will answer *yes* or *no* to a question, without fully understanding its purport — which is provoking, and derogatory in the highest degree to the dignity of the putter of the said question. Her presence of mind is equal to the most pressing trials of life, but will sometimes desert her upon trifling occasions. When the purpose requires it, and is a thing of moment, she can speak to it greatly; but in matters which are not stuff of the conscience, she hath been known sometimes to let slip a word less seasonably."

Here the description seems to present an overlapped picture of Bridget and Elia. Referring to Bridget, Elia tries partially to give a portrait of himself, who was also a hater of mere worldly trifles.

Elia's humorous but sympathetic pen gives the following moving picture of Bridget: —

"Her education in youth was not much attended to; and she happily missed all that train of female garniture, which passeth by the name of accomplishments. She was tumbled early, by accident or design, into a spacious closet of good old English reading, without much selection or prohibition, and browsed at will upon that fair and wholesome pasturage. Had I twenty girls, they should be brought up exactly in this fashion. I know not whether their chance in wedlock might not be diminished by it; but I can answer for it, that it makes (if the worst come to the worst) most incomparable old maid."

Both Lamb and Mary seem to have been permitted to enter the library of Samuel Salt in the Temple, in which they browsed all kinds of books indiscriminately to enrich their imagination. This

reading habit formed in her early girlhood surely helped her very much in beguiling his lonely hours, to say nothing of her contribution to the birth of her brother's *Essays of Elia* as well as to the early success of the *Tales from Shakespeare* written in co-operation. Hence comes the highest term of encomium for Bridget, "Had I twenty girls, they should be brought up exactly in this fashion". She did not publicly profess her participations in his brother's essays, but her influence was always felt by her brother. Everyody, who reads his essays, will feel that Lamb always wrote with his sister in his mind. It might have curbed the free play of his imaginaton sometimes, but on the whole it was good. Why? Hazlitt's words explain it. According to Talfourd,<sup>\*</sup> Hazlitt used to say that he never met with a woman who could reason, and had met with only one throughly reasonable — the sole exception being Mary Lamb. Thus we might say their double singleness was in one sense their double blessedness, and though he often was driven to a rebellious mood, even wishing one that Mary were dead from the unutterable desolation, he was on the whole happy to have her as his best and wisest companion to the last of his life. *Old China* is one of the best essays that are significant from the viewpoint of Mary's character and life in connection with those of Lamb and it is very interesting to find in this essay Bridget's words which express the intelligence of Lamb's fated yoke-fellow as well as that of Lamb.

### 3 The Insanity of Mary and Charles Lamb

Both Mary and Charls Lamb were victims to insanity, but while

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\* *Memoirs of Charles Lamb*, p.223.

Mary fell a constant victim to it, Charles suffered from it only once. When the year 1795 drew to a close, Charles became melancholy and unsociable, and it was necessary to confine him in a madhouse for six weeks from the end of 1795 to the beginning of 1796. As to the cause of his mental disorder, he writes to Coleridge (May 27, 1796) thus:—

“Coleridge, it may convince you of my regards for you when I tell you my head ran on you in my madness, as much almost as on another person, who I am inclined to think was the more immediate cause of my temporary frenzy.”

It is generally believed that by “another person” Ann Simmons — Alice won in his Essays and Anna in his sonnets — is meant. Lamb’s attachment to this Hertfordshire beauty began, as he often came to Hertfordshire to see his grandmother Mrs. Field, the housekeeper of Blakesware, and Lucas considers that early 1792 was the period of Lamb’s most serious wooing, but this passion for Ann Simmons was discouraged, so it is said, by Mrs. Field on the grounds that there was insanity in the Lamb’s family. This was the principal cause of Lamb’s mania, and there may have been some contributory causes, as the late professor Ross points out, such as grinding routine at the office and the sickly atmosphere at home, lack of diverting company, and the need of a change of scenery.

Lamb however, did not suffer any more attack of insanity and the cause might be ascribed to the family tragedy occasioned by “Mary’s frenzy in 1796, for it awoke him to the necessity of taking the whole responsibility of the family, to say nothing of the protection and care of poor Mary, and this consciousness of his serious situation, working as a constant stimulus and tonic for the fortification of his mind, served to prevent the recurrence of his mental derangement.

Mary's maniac fit that ended in the death of her mother occurred on September 22, 1796, but the symptoms of the disease was apparent on the evening of the previous day. The family recognized it as similar to the behaviour that had preceded Charles's breakdown. The next morning saw the same symptoms, and Charles went to summon Dr. David Pitcairn, but he was not at home, and he went to work.

In the late afternoon on that day Mary was working hard to complete an order with the help of her apprentice, when, because of some mistake made by her helper, she flew into a rage and attacked the girl violently. When she ran away, Mary pursued her, throwing knives and forks on the table after the girl, when Mrs. Lamb entered to stop Mary, but Mary, now in a complete fury, stabbed her mother to death.

What may have been the cause of this terrible fit of insanity that ended in the murder of his mother? The direct cause may be ascribed to the onerous work imposed upon her by the necessity of the reduced family circumstances brought about by Mr. Lamb's loss of employment caused by the death of Samuel Salt, but as an indirect cause one might suggest something hidden in the deepest recesses of her heart, for Mary was unfortunate enough to be treated with indifference by her mother in spite of her deep affection for her mother. Though Mary did her best to please her mother, she was not duly repaid. Her mother's love focussed on John, the eldest son, Mary's tender love and filial care for her mother were coldly received, or sometimes even repulsed. Lamb, with deep sympathy for her sister writes to Coleridge (October 17, 1796) thus:—

"Poor Mary! my mother indeed *never understood* her right. She loved her, as she loved us all, with a mother's love; but in opinion, in feeling,

and sentiment, and disposition, bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter, that she never understood her right; never could believe how much *she* could love her; but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness and repulse. Still she was a good mother. Good<sup>6</sup> forbid I should think of her but most respectfully, most affectionately. Yet she would always love my brother above Mary, who was not worthy of one-tenth of that affection which Mary had a right to claim."

In such a miserable situation Mary surely bewailed his misfortune many times, and her loneliness and desolation must have sent her into a reproachful mood, comparing herself with his brother John. These circumstances coupled with the accumulated stress of her heavy burden must have led to the terrible tragedy.

But this was not Mary's first experience of mania. The late Professor Ross, of the University of Oklahoma, the author of the *Ordeal of Bridget Elia*,<sup>\*</sup> states that Mary experienced the same maniac fit in December of 1794, though it seemed to have been kept secret. Naturally Mary's murderous frenzy in 1796 was the second attack on record. According to the chart drawn up by Professor Ross based on the recorded derangements of Mary Lamb, she had attacks almost every year and during the 53 years counting from the year 1794, when the probable initial attack came to the year 1844, when she died, the number of years which did not see Mary's fits of insanity was 15. They were 1795, 1799, 1801, 1802, 1804, 1806, 1808, 1816, 1819, 1824, 1826, 1828, 1831, 1837 1844.

In 1798, 1823, 1834 and 1835 Mary's mental derangement occurred

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\* Ross; *The Ordeal of Bridget Elia*, p.18

twice in one year, though the first fit in 1835 was the continuation of that of the end of 1834. This fit came to an end in February, but Mary's knowledge of his brother's death was a shock to her, and she again had an attack of mania in May and it lasted till September of that year.

Mary's disease had three stages. The initial stage was a short period of nervousness, which was followed as the second stage by sudden attacks of the disease, and as the final stage came a progressively longer period of depression. Professor Ross gives the words of Dr. James J. Gable, sometime Associate *Professor of Psychiatry* in the University of Oklahoma, regarding the disease of Mary Lamb. He is of opinion that her mental disorder was not organic, but functional, in origin, that it was not paranoid or shizoid, but maniac depression, in state. This maniac depression is generally of hereditary nature, and from this point of view, the insanity of Mary and Charles might be said to have derived its origin in their ancestors, but Katherine Anthony, the author of *The Lambs* opposes the hereditary view of the insanity in the Lamb family by saying that no dependable evidence of the statement has ever been adduced in her immediate family, her aunt, and (as far as we know) her mother being all mentally sound, and that the senility of John Lamb's old age crops up, but his long and active previous life presents no sign of any marked eccentricity, and cites for the confirmation of her view the words of Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe, the leading American authority on her disease:

"It is possible that a manio-depressive can turn up in a family without any traceable ancestral similitudes."

F. V. Morley, the author *Lamb before Elia*, however, calls our attention to what he considers physiological facts of clinical interest :

the decay of the father, the paralysis of the mother, and to a less degree the singularity of the aunt, the death of four out of the seven children, Lamb's lameness and stammer, the "inveterate clumsiness" of his hand, the difference of colours in his eyes, his night-fears in his childhood, his nervous temperament.

Most of these physical abnormalities may be found in normal families, so the mere existence of these features cannot prove that the Lambs had a hereditary streak of lunacy. What matters is that all these facts co-exist with the fits of insanity of Mary and Charles. From this point of view it may safely be asserted that there was unhealthy stock in the Lamb family or a step further, one might say that atavism may have had some connection with it, since manio-depressive is generally a hereditary phenomenon. Besides, the words of Mrs. Field cannot be denied as groundless.

Lamb himself, though he had shown no sign of mental derangement since the mania in 1795, was not without some signs of his excitable nervous system. His life record shows that he was a prey to frequent fluctuations of mood. His life was checkered by the alternation of sullen and dark mood and gay and fanciful whimsies. His whimsicalities may be said to have been his safety-valve, and he could by the opportune use of this valve manage to keep his mind in counterpoise, to prevent it from losing its balance. Besides this means, he had other resources with which to dispel his thick-coming fancies that might lead his mind astray. They were his love of reading, company, theatres, pictures, wine, and punning. By the help of these various means and mental tonics he could keep his mind in sound equilibrium.

On account of their fated misfortune, both Mary and Charles lived

their lives as "marked people." Hence their frequent changes of their abodes, and they knew they were the only people they could depend upon in this world. The thought may have been a terrible reality to them, and this may have served to unite them closer and tighter. Consequently one might find in their relations more than sisterly and brotherly love. As a proof of this, the two figures of Mary and Charles walking in the street hand in hand like lovers is given, but this closer unity and communication of the two were often interrupted by the recurrence Mary's fits of lunacy. This interruption was more prolonged with his last years. The vacancy produced in Charles's mind was redoubled when he left the East India House, and came to live on the outskirts of London, where he missed also his convivial company, to say nothing of the noise and gaiety of the capital town. Thus his attachment to Emma Isola, his adopted daughter, grew in intensity, but his strong self-control and wise judgement prevented it before it reached the breaking point and gave her to Edward Moxon, which caused her to say, "It restored me from that moment, as if by an electric stroke, to the entire possession of my senses." We also must remember that once Lamb proposed to Miss Fanny Kelly, a famous actress of the day, without any success on account of the supposed disease of lunacy in the Lamb family.

In spite of these occasional emotional ripples in Lamb's heart, his faith and constancy to Mary remained to the last. Without this faith and constancy their literary monuments — I would call *their*, nor *his*, — would not have seen the light. In this sense they might have been separate physically, but in mind they were united, single, one entire existence.



#### 4 Lamb the Essayist

Lamb was surely a Proteus in one sense, and under the cloak of Elia, a borrowed name, he assumed various characters. He tried every means to conceal his real intents in his *Essays of Elia*, calling the work the mixture of the true and false and when he seemed to be serious, he was ironically smiling at us, while when he seemed to be whimsical he was revealing his inmost heart. Thus he seems to be hard to catch in his real character in his Essays, even his stylistic characteristics bearing those of the 17th century writers. But his true character is apparent everywhere in his Essays. After all, Lamb, in his cautious way, calling it his self-pleasing quaintness, and clothing his Essays with borrowed beauty of his own creation, gave free vent to his occasional thoughts and sentiments mostly in connection with antiquity to which he was fervently attached.

Lamb's *Essays of Elia* is surely unique in English literature. It is true that through Bacon, Cowley, Addison, Steele, Goldsmith Lamb came down in a formal line, but in spirit Lamb was a direct descendant of Cowley through Bacon. Cowley's deep personal note found an echo in Lamb perhaps through temperamental propinquity. Tender melancholy and subtle delicacy mark the essays of the two. For example, Cowley's *Of Myself* is very close to Lamb's essays in intimacy of tone. Lamb, however, was quite different from these direct progenitors and others such as Burton, Browne, Fuller in that he was a man first, and did not forget that he was one of the weak, foolish<sup>\*</sup> creatures that ate the Tree of Knowledge. Hence came his warm sympathy, humour that strongly marked his Essays.

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\* All Fools' Day

Lamb's letter to Robert Lloyd (October, 1798) is interesting to know Lamb's true character. Lamb says in this letter as follows : —

“Our duties are to do good, expecting nothing again; to bear with contrary dispositions; to be candid and forgiving, not to crave and long after a communication of sentiment and feeling, but rather to avoid dwelling upon those feelings, however good, because they are our own. A man may be intemperate and selfish who indulges in *good feelings* for the mere pleasure they give him.”

Here is expressed Lamb's nobility of mind and tenderness of heart in its most salient form. This characteristic feature of Lamb's was not lost throughout his life. The shocking family tragedy must have taught him that human beings were frail creatures not to be castigated at their worst moment, but to be pitied. Every human being had some good to make up for his defect. Here came in his wise, and sympathetic view of this life, his magnanimity of soul, tolerance towards others, and this view of life coupled with his many trying experiences of life, made it possible for him to look upon the world with some well-intended detachment which finally led him to humour. This sense of humour allowed him to have some free play of mind, some relaxation of sentiment. Hence his occasional caprices and whimsicalities, but what underlay all vagaries was his sincerity, his integrity. This characteristic feature of Lamb's is specially prominent in *Mrs. Battle's Opinion on Whist*, *Grace before Meat*, *Imperfect Sympathies*, *Amicus Redivivus*, *Ellistoniana*, and *Guy Fawkes* not contained in *Essays of Elia* and the cause of his indifference to politics, and politicians often changing sides, and given to tergiversation, as he expresses in the *Convalescent*. Under the fictitious name Elia and with

his borrowed cloak of archaism, he freely expressed himself as occasions arose, and his mood directed him, but what underlay them was his true character, his sincerity. Paradoxically it may appear, his phantom character all the more distinctly discovered his own true nature. *Elia*, in this sense, might be factually the anagram of *A Lie*, but in spirit it was his essential character.

His manner of writing the words of Maurice Hewlett are the best explanation. He says thus in his essay *Maypole and Column* : —

‘Lamb was essayist first, and journalist with what remained over. A column was set up : he made it a maypole. No craftsman has draped his idea, or capered about it as Lamb did. He transfigures whatever he touches : more, he transmutes it. His seventeenth-century jargon, which you may find tiresome, is part of the fun.’

He enjoyed himself, capering and frisking round a maypole, having attached to it various ornaments and designs, both quaint and antiquated, but these adornments have not yet lost their original beauty and attraction, and to this day ever increasing admirers of Lamb, not only Western but also Eastern Elians, frisk and caper round this pole, united in the same warm generosity that Lamb showed to all humanity, especially to the weak and wretched.

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\* Henry Newbolt; *Essays and Essayists* (London) ,P.193