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## 'Mary Lamb and the Men'

Charles Lamb, writing in his indissoluble persona of Elia, about Bridget Elia, Mary Lamb's own fictional alter ego, memorably described their cohabitation as 'a sort of double singleness'.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines a different kind of double singleness and another mode of duality in the tribute poem, a lyric form which plays so important a part in Romantic poetry from *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's poem to Coleridge, downwards. In male tribute writing to Mary, in the sonnets dedicated to her by Lamb, in Elian essay, and in tributes from their literary contemporaries, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt and De Quincey, I perceive a structure of doubling whereby the self identifies in the other qualities valued by the self itself, so to speak.

This sort of self-mirroring in the other, in the I-you relationship which structures tribute writing, has a particular significance in the case of writing about Mary Lamb because of her mental illness and the gruesome fact that seized by a temporary fit of madness she murdered her mother, on 22 September 1796, stabbing her to death with a carving knife snatched up from the family dining table. Mary's matricidal crime and her suffering recurrent bouts of insanity, periodically requiring her incarceration in asylums, was an open secret among literary friends closest to the Lambs, yet their generous encomia in prose and verse kept coming despite, or maybe to some extent because of, this knowledge. Very possibly the warmth of feeling expressed for Mary was both an affirmation through the sister of the love felt for the brother and a desire to protect both from calumny by covering over the grim

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Lamb, *Elia & The Last Essays of Elia.*, ed. Jonathan Bate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 86.

reality of Mary's potential for violence, if left unchecked by incarceration and her brother's constant care. Coleridge, De Quincey, Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson, Talfourd, and Wordsworth all held Mary in high esteem, praising her intelligence, good sense, calmness, and sympathy. What is equally in evidence is how the qualities of the writers themselves permeate their tributes to Mary, affirming their connection to her through mirroring themselves in their constructed images of her.

## I

Modern Lamb criticism has drawn attention to the doubling of identities at work in Lamb's essays of Elia, not just in Elia and Bridget standing in for Charles and Mary, but also the merging of Elia and Bridget, Charles and Mary with other imagined selves, such as Mrs Battle, (in 'Mrs Battle's Opinions on Whist' (1821)), who is based upon and doubles for the real life Sarah Burney, whose closeness to her half-brother James Burney, with whom she eloped and set up house with for five years, is a scandalous echo of the close yet emphatically celibate sibling relationship of the Lambs.<sup>2</sup> 'We house together, old bachelor and maid . . . with such tolerable comfort, upon the whole, that I, for one, find in myself no sort of disposition . . . to bewail my celibacy',<sup>3</sup> avers Elia, in 'Mackery-End, In Hertfordshire' (1821), an essay based on the reciprocal affection of brother and sister. That Mrs Battle is an inveterate card player, like Mary herself, doubles the connection. The diarist Henry Crabb Robinson enjoyed playing cards with Mary almost into her dotage; he records visiting her in November of 1836, when,

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<sup>2</sup> The Lambs were close friends of the Burneys and holidayed with them in the Isle of Wight in July 1803, notes Eric G. Wilson, in *Dream-Child: A Life of Charles Lamb* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022), 235. Wilson observes that Sarah Burney was the model for Lamb's Mrs Battle, and that her half-brother Charles, also a keen card player, wrote *An Essay by Way of Lecture, on the Game of Whist* (235). On the Burneys' incestuous relationship, see Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 169.

<sup>3</sup> Lamb, *Elia*, 86.

at seventy-one years of age, he found her well and able to play a game of piquet.<sup>4</sup> And that Charles/Elia regards Mrs Battle/Sarah Burney with esteem notwithstanding her incestuous relationship mirrors the continuing respect demonstrated by contemporary writers for his own sister even in the face of her shocking act. In examining the element of doubling in tribute writing to Mary, this essay develops existing criticism on the fluid treatment of identity in the Lambs' rich body of work and their shared resistance to single narratives of selfhood.<sup>5</sup>

Mary's 'men', the poets and friends she shared with Charles, were united in celebrating the harmony of their close cohabitation. Although their poetry rarely alludes to the extreme violence of Mary's act, a notable exception being Coleridge's moving reference, in 'This Lime-Tree Bower. My Prison' (1797), to Charles's predicament, the 'evil and pain/ And strange calamity' (ll. 31-2),<sup>6</sup> they remained steadfast in their loyalty. Coleridge, who witnessed Mary experiencing the symptoms of another attack while spending time with the Lambs several years later, wrote to his wife on 4 April 1803: 'on Tuesday morning she layed hold of me with violent agitation and talked wildly about George Dyer / I told Charles, there was not a moment to lose / and I did not lose a moment—but went for a Hackney Coach, and took her to the private Madhouse at Hogsden / She was quite calm, and said—it was the best to do so—but she wept bitterly two or three times, yet all in a calm way. Charles is cut to the Heart'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Mary B. Balle, *Mary Lamb: An Extraordinary Life of Murder, Madness, and Literary Talent* (Troy, N.Y.: The Troy Book Makers, 2009), 309-10.

<sup>5</sup> See Aaron's *A Double Singleness* for a sustained attention to the fluid modes of writing of Charles and Mary Lamb. See also Gillian Beer, 'Lamb's Women', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, N.S. 47-48, July/October 1984, 138-143, and Alison Hickey, 'Double Bonds: Charles Lamb's Romantic Collaborations', *ELH*, 3, 63, Fall 1996, 735-771.

<sup>6</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 178-81

<sup>7</sup> S. T. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 6 vols, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71), 2, 941.

Notwithstanding possible medical explanations for Mary's extraordinary display of 'calm' tears in the prelude to a full-blown attack, the emphasis Coleridge places on the calmness of her disposition – even her bitter tears are wept in a calm way – is remarkable. It is also consistent with accounts of Mary's notable feminine composure given by other contemporaries. Writing later in the century, in his *Memoirs of Charles Lamb* (1892), Thomas Noon Talfourd describes Mary's character as tranquil, kind, and, says Talfourd, citing Hazlitt's opinion, also surprisingly reasonable, for a woman:

Miss Lamb would have been remarkable for the sweetness of her disposition, the clearness of her understanding, and the gentle wisdom of her acts and words, even if these qualities had not been presented in marvellous contrast with the distraction under which she suffered for weeks, latterly for months, in every year. There was no tinge of insanity discernible in her manner to the most observant eye; not even in those distressful periods when the premonitory symptoms had apprised her of its approach, and she was making preparations for seclusion. In all its essential sweetness, her character was like her brother's; while, by a temper more placid, a spirit of enjoyment more serene, she was enabled to guide, to counsel, to cheer him, and to protect him on the verge of the mysterious calamity, from the depths of which she rose so often unruffled to his side. To a friend in any difficulty she was the most comfortable of advisers, the wisest of consolers. Hazlitt used to say, that he never met

with a woman who could reason, and had met with only one thoroughly reasonable – the sole exception being Mary Lamb.<sup>8</sup>

Mary is presented as a split self, her mental instability contrasting with her near saintly disposition when sane; in this version of her doubled self Talfourd, writing as a friend, understandably exaggerates her better self, emphasising the sweet, feminine side of her disposition. The prose is heartfelt, and no doubt sincere, but it is not a window on to Mary's soul. Rather it is an idealised image of her; we do not as readers get to know Mary any better from Talfourd's description. His language bears no traces of the humour, for instance, demonstrated in Mary's letters to friends, as for example her correspondence with Sarah Stoddart on the subject of husbands and marriage, written in June 1806 when Sarah was hunting for a husband in Malta in the years before her (ultimately unsuccessful) marriage to William Hazlitt. Mary tells her friend: 'I have known many single men I should have liked in my life (if it had suited them) for a husband: but very few husbands have I ever wished was mine which is rather against the state in general that one is never disposed to envy wives their good husbands, So much for marrying'.<sup>9</sup> The writerly technique – evident in the near-chiasmus of the phrase, 'I have known many single men I should have liked in my life . . . for a husband: but very few husbands have I ever wished was mine' – indicates a clever, witty and lively personality that is entirely missing from Talfourd's account. His idealising of Mary's qualities places her within a kind of radiant cordon sanitaire, no doubt helping to shield her from moral blame, but also giving a version of her identity that is constrained by contemporary expectations of proper femininity.

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<sup>8</sup> Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, *Memoirs of Charles Lamb*, ed. Percy Fitzgerald (London, 1892), 223-4.

<sup>9</sup> *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 3 vols, ed. Edwin W. Marris, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975-78), 2, 229.

It remains a fact that a daughter who murders her mother in a shocking crime against nature is not an obvious candidate for Hazlitt's accolade of reasonableness nor for tributes from those contemporary poets and writers for whom nature often symbolised maternal love, wisdom, and a source of spiritual consolation. Yet it is not unusual to see Mary venerated in almost spiritual language. Charles led the way in casting his sibling union with Mary as a divine togetherness, a 'hypostatical union',<sup>10</sup> and writers in their circle of friends similarly eulogise Mary and the sacredness of the sororal relationship. On his first meeting with the Lambs, Thomas De Quincey alluded to Mary's Biblical namesake in crediting the 'winning goodness' of 'that Madonna-like Lady', Mary, in her preventing a quarrel between himself and Charles.<sup>11</sup> De Quincey was prone to set socially-marginalized girls and women on pedestals of his own devising: even as a schoolboy, he was drawn to his tutor Samuel Hall's 'twin daughters, Sarah and Mary, aged between twelve and fourteen, and both deaf, very plain, and "obscurely reputed to be idiots" . . . When he met them intermittently in the back passages of the Hall house he exchanged kisses with them, and his wish had "always been to beg them, if they really *were* idiots, not to mind it, since I should not like them the less on that account"<sup>12</sup>.<sup>12</sup> 'Thomas knew that his upbringing and his intellect put a good deal of distance between him and the two girls. Yet their situation seems also to have reminded him vividly of his own feelings of alienation and shame', writes Robert Morrison.<sup>13</sup> Later, De Quincey also worshipped Catherine, the young disabled daughter of William and Mary Wordsworth;

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<sup>10</sup> Letter 337 to Barry Proctor, November 11, 1824, *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 5 vols, ed. E. V. Lucas (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 657. The OED defines 'hypostatical' as 'the union of the divine and human natures in the "hypostasis" of Christ'.

<sup>11</sup> *The Collected Writings of De Quincey*, 14 vols, ed. David Masson (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1889-90), 3, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Morrison, *The English Opium Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), 24-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

and he is haunted in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) by the tragic figure of the fifteen-year-old prostitute Ann of Oxford Street. Referring to Mary as ‘Madonna-like’ sets her apart from the baseness of the real world, and from her madness. Like Ann of Oxford Street, Mary is untouchable to De Quincey; she becomes a sort of perverse or doubled Madonna – in her mania and murder - who lies beyond reach and beyond criticism. In like manner, as with Catherine Wordsworth, Ann of Oxford Street, and the pitiful twin Hall sisters (heralding perhaps his fascination with Mary’s twinned closeness to Charles), Mary becomes an essential part of De Quincey’s own self-being.

To Wordsworth, who recognized similarities with his relationship with Dorothy in the closeness of the Lambs’ sibling union, Charles is blessed in having Mary as his sister. In his poetic epitaph composed in December 1834, ‘To a Good Man of most dear Memory’, Wordsworth apostrophised Charles’s good fortune:

to thee  
Was given (say rather thou of later birth  
Wert given to her) a Sister—<sup>14</sup>  
(ll. 77-9)

As with Wordsworth and De Quincey, S. T. Coleridge also paid homage to Mary, and to Charles, his schoolboy friend. In a letter of December 1796, written in the months following Mary’s murderous assault in September of that year, Coleridge told the publisher Benjamin Flower that: ‘The young Lady, who in a fit of frenzy killed her own mother, was the Sister of my dearest Friend, and herself dear to me as an only Sister’.<sup>15</sup> Where circumspection and secrecy might have been expected even between friends, Coleridge both acknowledges the horror of Mary’s frenzied crime and loyally emphasises his attachment to her. In late

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<sup>14</sup> *The Poems of William Wordsworth: Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth*, 3 vols ed. Jared Curtis (Humanities E. Books), 3, 715-23.

<sup>15</sup> Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 1, 267.



eighteenth-century writing on friendship, Gurion Taussig points out, “‘generosity, fidelity, and firmness” [according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica’s* (1792) definition of friendship] identify a traditionally masculine kind of friendship, the female virtues of sensibility, taste and propriety define a newer more feminine mode of intimacy’.<sup>16</sup> In identifying Charles as his ‘dearest Friend’ and hypothesising of Mary as his sister, Coleridge sustains the gendered associations of eighteenth-century friendship of masculine friendship and feminine familial attachments, but the rhetorical act of bringing Mary and Charles together in the same sentence also pushes against divisions of gender towards a unity of attachment, mirroring the overriding desire for unity in Coleridge’s philosophical thought.

Lamb criticism has understandably been at pains to explain the apparent paradox whereby a matricidal sister is praised for her loving nature, her kindness, and her reasonableness. The Lambs’ mid-twentieth-century biographer Katherine Anthony speculates that in the interests of feminine propriety and a desire to safeguard Mary’s reputation, family and friends joined in a ‘conspiracy’ of silence, covering up the violence of her murderous act against her mother. Anthony remarks that the silence lasted so long, at least up to Mary’s death in 1847, that ‘it almost causes a shock to find John Hollingshead [the contemporary sketch writer who had a family connection to the Lambs] saying in his Memoirs in 1895 that Mary murdered her mother’.<sup>17</sup> The idea that Mary’s violence, not to mention her madness, violated the ideological and domestic space of proper femininity is taken up in a different way in contemporary gender criticism. Adriana Craciun, in *Fatal Women of*

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<sup>16</sup> Gurion Taussig, ‘Idea and Substance: Coleridge, Thomas Poole, and the Gendering of Male Friendship’, *Coleridge Bulletin*, N. S. 15, Spring 2000, 41-55, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Bonnie Woodberry, ‘The Mad Body as the Text of Culture in the Writings of Mary Lamb’, *Studies in English Literature* 39, Autumn 1999, 659-74, 659.

*Romanticism* (2003), takes Mary Lamb as a test case for her thesis that feminist literary criticism is troubled by the violence of the nineteenth-century 'femme fatale':

[c]entral to feminist literary criticism on nineteenth-century British women writers in general is the unspoken aim to demonstrate that women as a class eschew violence, destructiveness, and cruelty, except in self-defense or rebellion, like Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman in the attic'.<sup>18</sup>

Craciun's concern with Mary Lamb is as the figure or 'subject of violence' whose 'rebellion and rage cannot safely be assimilated in the liberal humanist feminism of Gilbert and Gubar' wherein female rage symbolizes rebellion against the 'repressive constraints of male power'.<sup>19</sup> Pushing away from gender criticism of Lamb's writings where her violence 'tends to disappear' and from accounts that dismiss her madness 'as an effect of "mental illness" (as if this explains anything)',<sup>20</sup> quips Craciun, her book *Fatal Women* recuperates the madness in Lamb's writing for an acceptance of the possibilities of a female propensity to violence. By contrast, the emphasis of Eric G. Wilson's 2022 Elian biography, *Dream-Child. A Life of Charles Lamb*, is on the importance of the 'delightful', sane Mary in becoming her brother's muse.<sup>21</sup> 'The sane Mary was charming, clever, sensible, comforting', writes Wilson, taking a hint from Thomas Noon's Talfourd's long testimonial to the goodness of her disposition, cited above.<sup>22</sup> Stressing the symbiotic aspect of their relationship, Wilson points out in his book's opening chapter the extent of the Lambs' similarity to one another. Seemingly living mirrors for each other:

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<sup>18</sup> Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> My reference is to the blurb on the inside of the dust jacket of *Dream-Child*.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Dream-Child*, 17.

They looked alike. Both were small and dusky and, as their friends Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke observed, both possessed ‘a countenance of singular sweetness, with intelligence.’ Mary’s ‘brown eyes were soft, yet penetrating; her nose and mouth very shapely; while the general expression was mildness itself. She had a speaking-voice, gentle and persuasive; and her smile was her brother’s own—winning in the extreme.’ Mary dressed like Charles, too—‘her apparel was always of the plainest kind; a black stuff or silk gown, made and worn in the simplest fashion’—and adopted his tobacco habit, taking ‘snuff liberally.’ Her ‘small, white, and delicately-formed hand’ hovered above ‘the tortoise-shell box containing the powder so strongly approved by them both, in search of the stimulating pinch.’ The two would dip ‘when hanging together over their favourite books and studies’.<sup>23</sup>

With the symmetry of a child’s butterfly painting, the difference of gender notwithstanding, Mary is the mirror image of Charles. Her singularly sweet countenance reflects his; her winning smile is identical to his smile. Virginia Woolf’s famous idealising in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) of a symbiotic ‘soul’ in which ‘two powers preside, one male, one female’, with the desired state being when ‘the two live in harmony, spiritually co-operating’,<sup>24</sup> would seem to apply perfectly to the Lambs’ twinned creative and domestic partnership.

Doubling abounds both in writing by the Lambs and writing about them. It is a fitting coincidence that first names of Charles and Mary Cowden Clark are a double for those of the Lambs and that their description of Mary as Charles’s domestic partner is mirrored in Wilson’s critical perspective on Mary as Charles’s creative muse. Just as literary critics and biographers

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128.

reflect to the reader the version of Mary that underwrites their theoretical or ideological concerns, so, in a similar manner, Mary's contemporary literary male admirers found in her qualities they cherished: Hazlitt's belief in the virtue of reasonableness, Coleridge's deep personal and philosophical investment in the value of friendship, Wordsworth's absorption with his own sister (reflected in his identification with Charles's devoted attachment to Mary). The following section of this essay focuses on mirroring patterns and literary manoeuvring in a clutch of verses to Mary by Charles written in the late 1790s in the years immediately preceding and following the tragic event of September 1796: 'To my Sister' (composed 1795), 'Sonnet: To my Sister' (1797), and 'To His Sister' (also 1797), actually titled 'Written on Christmas Day, 1797'.

## II

Mary Lamb was at her brother's side metaphorically, at least, from the earliest days of his writing career, during the years 1795-6 before he agreed to become her protector and before she became his 'severe step-wife' as Lamb jokingly said of her decades later, referring to their joint authorship and Mary's role in keeping him on track: 'not at bed and board but at desk and board'.<sup>25</sup> The sonnet 'To my Sister', given by Lamb to Coleridge for publication in his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), was composed when Lamb, uncannily mirroring Mary's fate, was confined to an asylum for six weeks from December 1795 into the New Year, owing to a temporary attack of insanity brought on, it is thought, by a disappointment in love. Although the poem is one of apology, and not a love sonnet as might be suggested by its loose Petrarchan form, it borrows something of that form's emotional vulnerability in the poet's self-admonishment for some harsh words spoken to his sister:

to my sister

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<sup>25</sup> Letter to B. W. Proctor, (Barry Cornwall), 11 November 1824, *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 657.

If from my lips some angry accents fell,  
 Peevish complaint, or harsh reproof unkind,  
 'Twas but the Error of a sickly mind,  
 And troubled thoughts, clouding the purer well,  
 & waters clear, of Reason: and for **me**  
 Let this my verse the poor atonement be,  
 My verse, which thou to praise: wast ever inclined  
 Too highly, & with a partial eye to see  
 No Blemish: thou to me didst ever shew  
 Fondest affection, & woudst oftimes lend  
 An ear to the desponding, love sick Lay,  
 Weeping my sorrows with me, who repay  
 But ill the mighty debt, of love I owe,  
 Mary, to thee, my sister & my friend—<sup>26</sup>

The 'mighty debt' of love owed to Mary belongs within the giving and receiving dynamic of tribute writing in a sonnet which, typically of Lamb's writing, is both artifice and personal expression. By cleverly blending archaic usages with authentic feeling, Lamb avoids the potential for embarrassment that comes with making a tribute, the awkwardness of being overly sentimental, too effusive with one's praise, which can too easily begin to sound disingenuous. The paradox of tribute writing whereby praising the other becomes a way of validating the self – the 'look at me' quality of tribute writing - is deftly handled by Lamb's sublimation of himself into the language of Christian confession and redemption. The sonnet is simultaneously a confession by Lamb and a bestowing of 'mighty love' on Mary, which mingles self (the poet) and other (the dedicatee) in a reciprocal relationship. Neither is Mary's identity single: the phrase 'Weeping my sorrows with me' identifies her by allusion with the Virgin Mary, 'Our Lady of Sorrows'; the same image echoes Mary Magdalene's act of cleansing

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<sup>26</sup> The text of the sonnet is given as it appears in Lamb's letter to Coleridge, 27 May, 1796, in which Lamb told his friend 'it was written in my prison house in one of my lucid intervals', *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 1, 4.

the Saviour's feet with her tears. In contrast, the Mary who 'woud'st ofttimes lend/ An ear to the desponding, love sick lay', gestures towards the secular lady of courtly love poetry. The singleness of the poet Lamb's ego is in turn pluralised by its absorption into the textualized body of his sister, in a distant echo of the Christian Sacrament.

In remarking on the dispersal of the poet's identity through the pluralised identities of his sister, I am developing accounts of the interplay between the discourses of Unitarianism and sensibility in the poetry Lamb wrote during the early years of his collaboration with Coleridge. The role Mary performs in the sonnet, 'the female able to comfort and guide the peevish male', who 'helps him move outward from imprisonment in his "own sickly mind"',<sup>27</sup> as Felicity James has observed, is replicated by proxy in 'This Lime-Tree Bower' with the release of Coleridge's imprisoned imagination as he imagines the celestial beauty of the landscape viewed by Lamb, joined by Wordsworth and his sister, on their walk up and over the Quantocks on that summer day in July 1797. The poem's blessing 'That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure' and its address to Lamb, 'my gentle-hearted Charles' is inclusive, made in the awareness of Mary's 'strange calamity'

Observers of the gender-fluid Elian narratives have remarked on Lamb's 'ability to enter and to identify with himself with feminine concerns'.<sup>28</sup> We see another version of this gender sympathy with women in Lamb's poetry, in the second sonnet entitled 'To my Sister', written after the matricidal act of September 1796, but bearing the same deep affinity as the first sonnet. Lamb had originally intended it to appear next to its twin verse in the planned second edition of Coleridge's *Poems* (1797). On the 2 January 1797, he wrote to Coleridge

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<sup>27</sup> Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 53.

<sup>28</sup> Beer, 'Lamb's Women', 141.

with the request that 'you will print it next after my other sonnet to my Sister'.<sup>29</sup> Coleridge declined and the poem was published separately in the *Monthly Magazine*, 4 October 1797, under the title 'Sonnet to a Friend':

(Sonnet  
to my sister)

Friend of my earliest years, & childish days,  
My joys, my sorrows, thou with me hast shared,  
Companion dear; & we alike have fared,  
Poor pilgrims we, thro' life's unequal ways.  
It were unwisely done, should we refuse  
To cheer our path, as featly as we may,  
Our lonely path to cheer, as trav'ellers use  
With merry song, quaint tale, or roundelay.  
And we will sometimes talk past troubles o'er.  
Of mercies shewn, & all our sickness heal'd,  
And in his judgments God remembering love:  
And we will learn to praise God evermore  
For those 'glad tidings of great joy' reveal'd  
By that sooth messenger, sent from above.

1797<sup>30</sup>

Even more than the earlier sonnet of the same title, Lamb's identity is blended into a relation of double singleness. Brother and sister, pilgrims together, seek in praising God to receive the redemptive power of his Almighty Love. Lamb had written to Coleridge on 3 October 1796 of Mary's recovery of her reason and her ability 'to distinguish between a deed committed in a transient fit of frenzy, & the terrible guilt of a **Mother's** murder'.<sup>31</sup> That act, perpetrated on a day that Lamb would record as the 'day of **horrors**',<sup>32</sup> lending it a symbolism more powerful than its dating by the Gregorian calendar would permit, is buried within the

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<sup>29</sup> *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 1, 83.

<sup>30</sup> The text of the sonnet is given as it appears in Lamb's letter to Coleridge, 2 January 1797, *Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 1, 83.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

poem's sense of timelessness. As with the first sonnet, archaic words unfix the poem's language from the present moment; indeed, part of the strength of the address to Mary in the second sonnet lies in the removal of the 'poor pilgrims' beyond the language of the present-day into a vague medieval pastness of 'merry song, quaint tale, or roundelay'. It is difficult not to see in the overt artistry of Lamb's medieval neologisms the use of language as a shield to protect, even to release his sister from moral blame. In the Lambs' complex world death, murder, and madness are never too far from the surface.

Writing of the *Elia* essays, Eric G. Wilson points out that Lamb's self-conscious crafting of selfhood through style and technique takes precedence over the idea of authentic self-expression:

[I]n opposition to the Lake Poets, he assumed that identity is a construct, and that a self is a theatrical role, and so authenticity is self-consciously playing a character of your own making. For Lamb, averse to grand arguments about Nature and Imagination, the play's the thing, the only thing. Style *is* substance.<sup>33</sup>

We can say that at the centre of the tribute verses to Mary is the question of the singleness of self-identity, a singleness that is disrupted by Lamb's stylistic play around gender which is a key aspect of his creative artistry, as manifested in a later poem to Mary, 'Written on Christmas Day, 1797'. The poem, written during one of Mary's enforced incarcerations, begins:

I am a widowed thing, now thou art gone!  
Now thou art gone, my own familiar friend<sup>34</sup>

It is quite unusual for a man to describe himself as a widow, especially in the idiom of a single man talking about his sister. 'Familiar' is an important word for Charles Lamb, of course,

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<sup>33</sup>Wilson, *Dream-Child*, 380.

<sup>34</sup>*Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 5, 22.



whose most famous poem is 'The Old Familiar Faces' (1798), and one that has universal resonances without regard to gender. Mary is his 'own familiar friend'; it does not seem to matter in this context that she is female rather than male, which might be seen as a little strange for a self-conscious writer like Charles Lamb, except that her transgression of traditional gender boundaries through enacting the violence associated with men might explain the residue of disturbed gender patterns in Charles's poems.

Behind Lamb's gender identification with the female subject position of the widow lies a serious disidentification by Lamb with the male aggression and masculinity identified with the matricidal act. As Aaron observes: 'Whether through his own person, or through the identification of the matricidal act with male aggression, masculinity and all its attributes had nothing but negative connotations for Charles: proud, rapacious, and destructive, its "impertinence" needed to seek atonement through voluntary immersion in childlike or female roles'.<sup>35</sup> In what seems a paradox, Charles presents Mary as an ameliorative presence in the family. She is:

that honoured mind, whose sweet reproof  
And meekest wisdom in times past have smoothed  
The unfilial harshness of my foolish speech,  
And made me loving to my parents old

('Written on Christmas Day, 1797', ll. 4-7)

Reading Lamb's sonnets leaves one with a profound sense of his emotional attachment to Mary that is heightened, not diminished, by the self-conscious nature of his art: his punning on names and his play with shifting gender identities. Lamb is one of those writers whose openness to the play of language and shifting gendered subject positions fits with Virginia

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<sup>35</sup> Aaron, *A Double Singleness*, 150.

Woolf's definition of the true creative mind as being a mingling of genders: 'man-womanly' and 'womanly-manly'.<sup>36</sup>

Romantic-period tribute poetry, although loosened from the constricting framework of the eighteenth-century literary dedication, nevertheless retains certain formal expectations that Gérard Genette has argued, in his study *Paratexts* (1987), is crucial to a text's reception.<sup>37</sup> 'The dedicatory epistle is, as a matter of fact, *de rigueur* until the end of the eighteenth century', Genette reminds us.<sup>38</sup> Lamb lends a spiritual depth to the surface formalities of the literary tribute, offering a sense of connectedness in the poems to his sister reminiscent of Wordsworth's address to his sister Dorothy, in the final verse paragraph of 'Tintern Abbey':

My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once,  
My dear, dear Sister!

(*'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'*, ll. 117-122).

Wordsworth's lines pay homage to Dorothy with whom he has been in silent conversation across the length of a poem, lines that in bearing witness to the restorative effect of the poet's reunion with his sister after suffering a near mental collapse five years earlier, bring to mind the shared context of Lamb's mental breakdown in the Hoxton asylum in 1795 in which he composed his sonnet 'To my Sister'. Both poems have the characteristic of the conversation poem associated with the discourse of friendship, separation and reconciliation in 1790s Romanticism. Double singleness, Lamb's paradoxical term for his relationship with Mary,

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<sup>36</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans by Jane E. Lewin, *Literature, Theory, Culture* 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

might indeed provide a synonym for thinking about the conversation poem as displaying not the similitude of identity, but rather the existence of two separate yet linked entities. Just as Wordsworth finds himself reflected in his sister's 'wild eyes', so in his poetic epitaph to Elia, written on Charles's death in 1834, 'To a Good Man of most dear Memory'(1835), everything Charles holds dear, 'all interests, hopes, and tender cares' are mirrored in Mary. It is she:

In whom thy reason and intelligent heart  
Found—for all interests, hopes, and tender cares,  
All softening, humanising, hallowing powers,  
Whether withheld, or for her sake unsought—  
More than sufficient recompence!

(ll. 79-86)

The phrase 'sufficient recompence', a near echo of those powerful words from 'Tintern Abbey', 'abundant recompense', is a verbal doubling that is appropriate for Wordsworth's recognition, in Charles's closeness to Mary, his attachment to his own sister. 'To a Good Man' runs to 130 lines; the first half is devoted to Charles, the second to his sister and to sibling love. This formal arrangement of double singleness is something Charles would no doubt have recognized and for which Wordsworth supplies an alternative metaphor, one that is itself a doubling in being drawn both from nature and, by connotation, from the world of finance, familiar to both poets, Lamb of course in his three decades in the accounting office of the East India Company and Wordsworth in his government appointment in 1813 as Westmorland Distributor of Stamps. In the words of the poem, sibling togetherness is:

a double tree  
With two collateral stems sprung from one root.

(ll. 96-7)