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The Shakespearean Minefield and the Silence of the Lambs [1]

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It is a cozy domestic scene, the brother and sister sitting together, writing for young children simplified versions of great dramatic works. They are Charles and Mary Lamb, he about thirty, at the beginning of their enterprise, and she ten years older. Mary was perfectly aware of the pure *Gemütlichkeit* of the moment. As she wrote to her friend Sarah Stoddart: "[Y]ou would like to see us as we often sit writing on one table (but not on one cushion sitting), like Hermia & Helena in the Midsummer's Nights Dream. or rather like an old literary Darby and Joan"—proverbially, "an old married couple living contentedly a placid domestic life." [2] What could be wrong with this comfortable picture? Well, the dramatic works in question are twenty of Shakespeare's plays, and to make them suitable for children, their well-meaning redactors must remove, tone down, or conceal a profusion of offensive representations of crime, savagery, and sexuality. To render these materials acceptable for the young, the Lambs had to inspect them carefully in order to find and then exclude what is objectionable. In short, like any censor—like, for instance, Thomas Bowdler, the first edition of whose *Family Shakespeare* appeared in 1807, the same year as *Tales from Shakespeare*—the Lambs had to go looking for what was bad.[3]

And then, of course, there was something about Mary… who on September 22, 1796, had stabbed their mother to death. That was a decade before the *Tales from Shakespeare*; might one assume that Mary was now as able as anyone else to gaze over an expanse of aesthetic distance upon the darkest parts of Shakespeare? Her transformation of bad to good in the plays perhaps parallels her own such transformation. Alternatively, in some ways Mary's silence about the undesirable parts of Shakespeare would appear homologous to the official silence that once prevailed about her condition, leading to development of an "idealized portrait of [Mary] Lamb as the most reasonable of women who by 'a temper more placid, a spirit of enjoyment more serene' than her brother's,[4] guided him and protected him with her almost legendary

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1 In slightly different form, this paper was presented to the Coleridge Summer Conference at Cannington in 2002

2 *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), II, 228-29 (May 30-June 2, 1806). The gloss on Darby and Joan is the editor's, 230, n. 4.

3 Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) published *The Family Shakespeare* in a four-volume edition in 1807 and in ten volumes in 1818. The work resulted from his "collaboration with his unmarried sister Henrietta, whose name was kept off the title pages lest her reputation suffer," presumably from the reader's knowledge that she went looking for, and thus became exposed to, those bad things. See R[.]A[.]F[oakes], "Family Shakespeare" in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135. It is interesting that respect for a woman's reputation in one century leads in another to her nearly total obscurity—and to the man's getting all the credit, however dubious his achievement might now appear.

4 Bonnie Woodbery, "The Mad Body as the Text of Culture in the Writings of Mary Lamb," *Studies in English Literature*, 39,4 (Autumn 1999), 659. Woodbery is quoting Thomas Noon Talfourd, *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols. (London: Moxon, 1848), 2:226-27.

'practical mind' ". With this idealized Mary any writer might be pleased to collaborate; but a far more perilous situation is conceivable with the real Mary. Imagine sitting next to the woman who murdered your mother and being aware that, for instance, in her head, at one moment, are reflections on the homicidal designs of the Queen in *Cymbeline* toward her stepdaughter Imogen.[5]

"I think it will be popular among the little people," Charles Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning, as he and Mary neared the end of their labors on *Tales from Shakespeare.*[6] Mary agreed, although as she wrote in the first part of the preface to the *Tales*, her part, the volume was a kind of stopgap until its intended reader became ready for the real thing. Hence, her and her brother's "diligent care… to select such words as might least interrupt the effect of the beautiful tongue in which [Shakespeare] wrote…"; hence, also, her acknowledgment that eventually "the young readers will… come to see the source from which these stories are derived…"(5).[7] And these young readers would be, above all, females: "For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book…" (6). This privilege enjoyed by boys will, however, be turned to the advantage of their sisters: "instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand: and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken…" (6-7).

The protection of females from full experience of Shakespeare (especially interesting, to readers of this journal, in view of Coleridge's insistence that Shakespeare, preeminently among writers, wrote for women as well as for men),[8] as Mary Lamb charts it, invites careful scrutiny. For very little girls as

[5] When Mary Lamb killed her mother, she was killing, if Charles is to be believed, a mother who had never treated her well. "Poor Mary, my mother indeed *never understood* her right," he wrote Coleridge. "She loved her, as she loved us all with a **Mother's love**, but in opinion, in feeling, & sentiment, & disposition, bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter, that she never understood her right. Never could believe how much *she* loved her—but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness & **repulse**. . . ." *Letters* I (1975), 52 (October 17, 1796). One must wonder if Mary saw the mistreatment of daughters and stepdaughters in Shakespeare as analogous to her own earlier situation.

[6] *Letters* II, 225 (May 10, 1806).

[7] Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807; London: Penguin Books, 1995). Quotations from the Preface and the Tales are taken from this volume (which reprints the 2nd edition of 1809), with pages numbers supplied parenthetically.

[8] In lecture 6 of his *1811-12 Lectures on Shakespeare & Milton*, according to the notes of John Payne Collier, "It had been remarked Coleridge believed by Dryden [in his preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, according to Foakes] that Shakespeare wrote for men only but Beaumont and Fletcher or rather the gentle Fletcher for women. He wished to begin by shewing (not only) that this is not true, not only that he was not inferior to Beaumont & Fletcher but of all our writers he alone had truly drawn the female character with that mixture of the real & the ideal which belongs to woman. . . ." Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 5:1, 297-98. Coleridge's implicit premise that Shakespeare's works will interest women because he draws the female character so well is intriguing.

for very little boys, it is assumed that Shakespeare will be tough going, hence the desire "to make these Tales easy reading for very young children" (6). But at some point after the "very young" stage, boys at "a much earlier age than girls" gain access to "their fathers' libraries," while the girls presumably must remain content with the *Tales*. Easy reading notwithstanding, even the *Tales* appear to present difficulties of comprehension to the poor girls, who thus need the "kind assistance" of their brothers with "such parts as are hardest for them to understand." Parts of the *Tales*, that is, not of the original plays, will be hard to understand. Here, however, the boys— who are not necessarily older than the sisters whom they will assist—must exercise some caution and display good judgment in "selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear," a clear implication that not everything *is* proper for her ear. "[I]n order to preserve [the] innocence of women, as ignorance is courteously termed," Mary Wollstonecraft had written, "truth is hidden from them…" [9] But what will happen in a case where difficulty in understanding is created precisely by the excision of that which is improper, and where the price of the sister's desired understanding is the disclosure of what must remain unknown?

It will not be impertinent, I hope, to suggest that the privilege enjoyed by young male readers of Shakespeare extends also to the male author of the *Tales from Shakespeare*, notwithstanding his legendary love for, and solicitude toward, his sister. "I have done Othello & Macbeth," Charles wrote to Manning, on an earlier occasion (May 10, 1806), "and mean to do all the Tragedies." [10] He did also *King Lear, Timon of Athens, Romeo and Juliet,* and *Hamlet.* The other tragedies (*Titus Andronicus, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*) are omitted from the *Tales*, as are *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor, Troilus and Cressida*, and all the plays about English history. Otherwise, the Lambs tell between them the stories of *Pericles* and the thirty-six plays from the 1623 Folio, but the division of labor is interesting. Charles reserved to himself the tragedies, ever the more exalted literary form, having as its subject, as Coleridge pointed out, "the spiritual part of our nature," whereas comedy makes "the animal the governing power." [11] Tragedy is not only exalted, it is also serious, and because exalted and serious, it is masculine, that is, the preserve of males.

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9 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women,* ed. Miriam Brody (1792; London: Penguin Books, 1985), 131.

10 *Letters,* II.225.

11 In an 1812 lecture, Coleridge contrasts the creators of the two ancient modes: "The Tragic Poet idealizes his characters by giving to the spiritual part of our nature a more decided preponderance over the animal cravings & impulses, than is met with in real Life—the Comic poet idealizes his by making the animal the governing power & the intellectual the mere instrument. . . ." Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lecture 4 in *1812 (1st Course) Lectures on Drama*, ed. R. A. Foakes in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 5:1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987 [Bollingen Series LXXV]), 456-57. Compare these recent remarks of Jasper Griffin: "In tragedy the dignity and decency of ordinary life are greatly exaggerated. Nobody ever needs to go to the bathroom; nobody eats or drinks, except for some horrific act of cannibalism; sexual relations may be criminal or deadly, but never merely indecent and never simply fun. For comedy all that solemnity was god-given. Its louche and vulgar world, in which people shamelessly blurt out their secrets of masturbation, excretion, cowardice, and perversion, could be played off not only against the comparative decency of our world, but also against the super-decent world of tragedy." "The Comedy Murder Case", a review of *The Death of Comedy* by Erich Segal, *The New York Review of Books*,49, 12, July 18, 2002, p. 35.

Ann Thompson, the editor of the forthcoming third edition of *Hamlet* in the Arden series, makes an interesting generalization about the history of Shakespeare editions: "I had noticed how few women were involved in editing, and how they always did the same 'easy' Folio-only comedies." [12] Not very long ago, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, under the general editorship of G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) divided introductions to the plays thus: to Herschel Baker, the histories; to Hallett Smith, the romances; to Frank Kermode, the tragedies; and to Anne Barton—the comedies. Did Mary Lamb have Ann Thompson's sense of being served left overs? Mary did note to her friend Sarah Stoddart that "Charles having picked out the best stories first [for the *Tales from Shakespeare*,] these latter ones [which were left to her] take more time being more perplext and unmanageable." [13] What, analogously, were her thoughts on the omission, "by error of the publisher," William Godwin, of her name from the first edition of the *Tales*—though it was she with whom he had contracted for publication in the first place? [14]

The evasions necessitated by retelling the stories of Shakespeare's plays could probably be well illustrated by any of them, beginning with the first in the Lambs' volume, *The Tempest*, where the only reason given for Prospero's detestation, and consequent enslavement, of Caliban is the very general "bad nature which Caliban inherited from his mother Sycorax" (12). For a desired audience of girls perhaps about the age of Miranda, fifteen, Mary Lamb does not repeat Prospero's charge, "I have used thee/ (Filth as thou art) with humane care, and lodged thee/ In mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate/ The honor of my child," or Caliban's taunting rejoinder, "O ho, O ho! Would't had been done!/ Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans" (1.2.345-50).[15] As a matter of fact, after a certain prominence in the first two pages of Mary Lamb's story, Caliban essentially disappears; attention paid to him thereafter is entirely incommensurate with his importance in the play. Prospero invokes him later in an effort to reduce Ferdinand in Miranda's eyes (" 'I tell you, foolish girl, most men as far exceed this, as he does Caliban,' " 17), and, near the end, Prospero has him "prepare some food" (22) for the royal wedding. Ignoring Caliban, Mary Lamb all but erases him from her tale.

Instead, however, I should like to focus on *Pericles*, the volume's concluding tale, which, Charles told Wordsworth, "We think… of hers the best." [16] The problems of retelling *Pericles* for children, of identifying and excluding forbidden material, hugely magnify those of *The Tempest*, and it is

[12] Quoted by Ron Rosenbaum in "Shakespeare in Rewrite," *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2002, p. 74.

[13] *Letters*, II.235 (June 27-July 2, 1806).

[14] See "Lamb, Mary Anne" in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, ed. Virginia Blain et al (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 624.

[15] Throughout this paper I quote Shakespeare from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2002).

[16] When the *Tales* were nearly completed, Charles Lamb wrote to Wordsworth part of his and Mary's assessment of their achievement: "We think Pericles of hers the best, & Othello of mine— but I hope all have some good." *Letters*, II.256 (January 29, 1807).

interesting that the Lambs, at least Charles, should judge it Mary's best. Material repressed in Mary Lamb's version of *Pericles* includes incest, cannibalism, and prostitution, making her tale, at least potentially, especially treacherous. "Pericles, Prince of Tyre," this tale begins, "became a voluntary exile from his dominions, to avert the dreadful calamities which Antiochus, the wicked emperor of Greece, threatened to bring upon his subjects and city of Tyre, in revenge for a discovery which the prince had made of a shocking deed which the emperor had done in secret; as commonly it proves dangerous to pry into the hidden crimes of great ones" (296). Pericles flees to Tarsus, and then learning of Antiochus's continued pursuit, leaves there and is shipwrecked on the coast of Pentapolis,[17] where he wins a tournament for the hand of Thaisa, the daughter of King Simonides; even so, "for fear of Antiochus [Pericles] gave out that he was a private gentlemen [sic] of Tyre," and only some months after the marriage when "he received intelligence that his enemy Antiochus was dead" does Pericles disclose his identity to Simonides to whom, "It was a matter of great surprise and joy… to find that his son-in-law (the obscure knight) was the renowned prince of Tyre…" (298).

For three pages Mary Lamb documents these extreme consequences of Pericles' discovery, including his contamination with fear of a degree distinctly unbecoming a hero and a prince, yet with never a word about the nature of the "shocking deed," the "hidden crimes," behind them. The deed, of course, is Antiochus's incestuous alliance with his daughter, hinted at in a riddle she composed, which Pericles reads early in the play: " 'I am no viper yet I feed/ On mother's flesh which did me breed./ I sought a husband, in which labor/ I find that kindness in a father./ He's father, son, and husband mild;/ I mother, wife, and yet his child./ How they may be, and yet in two,/ As you will live, resolve it you' " (1.1.65-72). Pericles easily solves this riddle; in a soliloquy, he apostrophizes the absent Antiochus: " …now you're both a father and a son/ By your uncomely claspings with your child/ (Which pleasure fits a husband, not a father),/ And she an eater of her mother's flesh/ By the defiling of her parents' bed…" (128-32). Less clever than Pericles, the daughter's earlier suitors were stumped by the riddle, and in consequence were beheaded, "martyrs slain in Cupid's wars" (39). These martyrs are almost certainly less clever than Shakespeare's readers, too, who probably find the riddle's meaning obvious enough. There they will differ from Mary Lamb's readers, be they "young readers" or old, who could not possibly, from the information provided in her tale, solve the riddle posed by the words "shocking deed" and "hidden crimes." "Good riddles are pleasing," Aristotle writes, because they stimulate "learning"; for Mary Lamb's riddle, that learning will follow a visit to the "fathers' libraries." [18] The words "shocking deed" could well stimulate further investigation in the way of the letter Edmund ostentatiously stuffs into

[17] Hence the stage direction "*Enter* PERICLES *wet*." at the beginning of act 2, scene 1, of the play.

[18] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, tr. George A. Kennedy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3, 11, 6, p. 250.

his tunic when Gloucester arrives in 1.2 of *King Lear*. Edmund knew what the effect of his stimulus would be. Did Mary Lamb also know? Did she regard her own phrases, like "shocking deeds," as triggers to her readers' curiosity?

It is precisely to exclude such brutal and sexual matters as these that the *Tales from Shakespeare* exist in the first place. It is because such things really happen, in the world and in the imagination, and Shakespeare says so, that females are not "permitted to look into this manly book" until they are ready, and therefore the Lambs have kindly given them as a substitute this "introduction to the study of Shakespeare" (5). Nevertheless the introduction is itself unable to conceal hints of that which it has repressed, and traces of the excluded are still more visible, in spite of themselves, in the tales. Shakespeare's works are a minefield, and even a map of the minefield will reveal the presence, though not the precise nature, of the buried explosives. Asked by the young girl to explain Antiochus's shocking deed, her knowing brother can do no better than shake his head and imitate the silence of the Lambs.

Tharsus, the city governed by Cleon and his wife Dionyza, suffers a terrible famine, relieved by Pericles and his ships "stored with corn to make your needy bread/ And give them life whom hunger starved half dead" (1.4.95-96). So great was their hunger before this moment that "Those mothers who to nuzzle up their babes/ Thought naught too curious, are ready now/ To eat those little darlings whom they loved…" (42-44). Readiness to eat the little darlings does not quite say whether the mothers actually did so, but the ambiguity is not even raised by Mary Lamb, who writes merely that, upon "hearing that the city of Tarsus was at that time suffering under a severe famine, [Pericles] took with him a store of provisions for its relief" (296). The price of suppression of this ambiguity is loss of the resonances of the cannibalism of the Daughter's earlier riddle, her "feed[ing]/ On mother's flesh which did me breed." Subsequently, Pericles will leave the infant Marina in the keeping of Cleon and Dionyza, extraordinarily poor judgment if the possibility of cannibalism, tainted by incest, is present. Grown to young womanhood, Marina possesses such beauty and graces as to eclipse those of Philoten, Cleon and Dionyza's daughter. Dionyza is so envious on her daughter's behalf that she arranges to have her servant Leonine murder Marina, a deed prevented by the arrival of pirates, who kidnap Marina.

The pirates take Marina to Mytilene and, in Shakespeare, sell her into a brothel, where she is most welcome since, as Bawd says, "We were never so much out of creatures. We have but poor three, and they can do no more than they can do; and they with continual action are even as good as rotten" (4.2.6-9). Bawd's hopes that the new "virgin" will renew business are soon dashed, however, because Marina's virtue transforms the brothel's customers: "she's able," Bawd says, "to freeze the god Priapus and undo a whole generation… [S]he would make a puritan of the devil if he should cheapen a kiss of her" (4.6.3-4, 8-9). In Mary Lamb's tale, there is of course no brothel, no bawd, no

sex industry. In Mytilene, Marina is simply "sold… for a slave," who rapidly becomes so famous "for her beauty and her virtues" that Lysimachus, the governor of Mytilene, falls in love with her—as in Shakespeare (where, however, Lysimachus has come to the brothel as a customer). There is no red flag here to suggest a repression of original material, as there is in the "shocking deed" of Antiochus. Still, the earlier evasions over the causes of Pericles' fear, and the mystery of the fear itself, may continue to unsettle the tale's young readers.

By accident or design, Mary Lamb's retelling of some of Shakespeare's plays inevitably hints at the very matters the tales were composed to exclude. Her ostensible purpose, to remove from Shakespeare materials unsuitable for girls, is undermined by words that stimulate curiosity about exactly these materials. One critic, Arthur Eastman, has called Mary's brother Charles Lamb's contributions to the *Tales from Shakespeare*, "ultimately more influential"[19] as Shakespearean criticism than anything else he wrote in that vein, such as his celebrated essay "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare: Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage-Representation" (1811).[20] If Charles's tales are a form of literary criticism, as Eastman assumes, and I agree, then so are Mary's, and their distinguished achievement is to lead their readers to Shakespeare's text, excitedly anticipating what they will find there. In this guidance, Mary Lamb is just possibly seeking to liberate young girls—actually, to have them liberate themselves—from that darkness in which propriety would confine them.

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[19] Arthur M. Eastman, *A Short History of Shakespeare Criticism* (1968; New York: Norton, 1974), 399.
[20] "On the Tragedies of Shakspeare: Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage-Representation" in *The Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb*, ed. Saxe Commins (New York: Modern Library, 1935), 291.