Catalog of the Peal Exhibition: Charles and Mary Lamb

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Charles and Mary Lamb

A Midsummer Night's Dream, which Mary Lamb (1764-1847) adapted for Tales from Shakespear, contains descriptions of "The lunatic, the lover and the poet," but she and her brother Charles (1775-1834) could easily have given these human conditions "A local habitation and a name" by drawing on their own experiences. Lamb spent six weeks of 1795 voluntarily and "very agreeably" in a madhouse, his confinement in part the result of a disappointment in love. He wrote his close friend and former classmate at Christ's Hospital, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "I am got somewhat rational now, and don't bite anyone. But mad I was." The hereditary mental instability in the Lamb family never again seriously threatened him, yet it affected the course of his life.

In September 1796, while temporarily deranged, Mary stabbed their invalid mother to death with a bread knife. Steadfastly refusing to commit his sister to a public madhouse, Lamb took her under his care, a responsibility he discharged with absolute love for four decades. Normally a woman of great charm and intelligence, Mary suffered from periodic seizures that required stays in private asylums.

In 1792, after six months as a clerk at South Sea House, London, Lamb began a thirty-three-year career as a clerk at East India House. A man of business rather than a professional writer, Lamb could devote only leisure time to literature, and he facetiously termed the hundred volumes of his clerical job his "true works."

Lamb's earliest publications were poems. In a letter of 1796 he reminded Coleridge of the "winter nights" of the previous year through which they had sat in a "little smoky room at the Salutation and Cat" in Newgate Street, "beguiling the cares of life with Poesy." Lamb credited Coleridge with kindling in him, "if not the power, yet the love of poetry, and beauty, and kindliness." Coleridge also generously included several of Lamb's early poems in his own published collections. In 1798 Lamb collaborated with Charles Lloyd on Blank Verse (item 37), issued the year Coleridge and William Wordsworth brought out Lyrical Ballads. The volume, dedicated to Robert Southey, contained twenty pieces, thirteen by
Lloyd and seven by Lamb, notably, his most famous poem, “The Old Familiar Faces.”

Introductions to other poets only fired his own poetic zeal. He met Robert Southey, Coleridge’s brother-in-law and the future laureate, in 1795. In 1797, while holidaying with Coleridge at Nether Stowey, he established a warm friendship with Wordsworth; during the visit Coleridge wrote “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” addressed to Lamb. Although he continued to pen poetry and verse until his death, he suffered from no delusions about his talents in this field, referring to such writing in 1822 as a “harmless occupation.” In the May 1815 number of The Pamphleteer, Thomas Noon Talfourd, Lamb’s friend and original biographer, mentioned him in the ambitious article, “An Attempt to Estimate the Poetical Talent of the Present Age, Including a Sketch of the History of Poetry, and Characters of Southey, Crabbe, Scott, Moore, Lord Byron, Campbell, Lamb, Coleridge, and Wordsworth.” Talfourd allotted but a single page to Lamb, praising him warmly but generally: “Of all living poets he possesses most the faculty of delighting. . . .”

Nature, that sine qua non for the Romantics, left Lamb cold. To Wordsworth’s invitation to the Lake District he replied, “Separate from the pleasure of your company, I don’t much care if I never see a mountain in my life.” Of all places, Lamb most loved his native London, with its infinite variety of sights and sounds.

Lamb’s patronage of the city’s theatre, usually in the company of Mary, and his friendships within the profession, led him several times to try his hand at theatrical composition, with disappointing results. The blank-verse tragedy John Woodvil (item 39, written 1798-1799, printed 1802), for example, proved a slight first effort that John Kemble rejected for Drury Lane. The text, with its imitation of the Elizabethans within a Restoration setting, confirms Lamb’s confession to the philosopher William Godwin that he was “the worst hand in the world at plot.” Southey characterized the dialogue as “delightful poetry badly put together.”

Lamb made a greater practical and literary contribution to the drama in 1808 with his editing of Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived about the Time of Shakspeare. To an anthology of scenes from plays by Webster, Heywood, Peele, Tourneur, and others, he added enthusiastic and sensitive annotations and comments. In union with Coleridge’s lectures and Hazlitt’s essays, Lamb’s Specimens helped revive interest in Shakespeare and his
contemporaries.

The previous year, 1807, Charles and Mary had published their classic *Tales from Shakespear. Designed for the Use of Young Persons* (item 38). Commissioned by Godwin, then issuing a "Juvenile Library," the two-volume work rendered the plots of twenty plays into pleasant prose that unobtrusively taught the moral implications. Mary retold fourteen comedies, possibly with some fraternal assistance, and Charles summarized six tragedies, including *Hamlet*, with a title character "mad in craft," and a heroine who goes mad in fact. As the preface states, they prepared the adaptations especially for girls, "because boys are generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls," and thus have "the best scenes" memorized before their sisters may look into this "manly book." The *Tales* enjoyed immediate success and went into several editions.

Lamb published nothing from 1814 to 1818, when an edition of his *Works* appeared. To Wordsworth he wrote in 1818, "I reckon myself a dab at Prose—verse I leave to my betters." Indeed, it was as an essayist and critic that he won lasting fame. In 1820, at the age of forty-five, he began contributing to *The London Magazine* a series of miscellaneous essays under the signature Elia. Lamb took his pseudonym from an Italian clerk employed thirty years earlier at South Sea House, where Lamb's brother John still worked. Bridget and James Elia represent Mary and John. The essays, which originally ran until 1823, constituted his most brilliant writing and truly established his reputation. Collected, they appeared as *Elia* in 1823 (item 40).

Largely autobiographical, the twenty-eight Elia pieces treat of Lamb's own experiences, impressions, prejudices, and enthusiasms in a prose style felicitously combining humor and deep feeling, thoughtfulness and extravagance. The themes range widely: "Christ's Hospital Five-and-Thirty Years Ago," written in the third person, recalls with poignance and delight the school days of Lamb and Coleridge; in "Dream Children: A Reverie" he muses on the family he might have had by his first love, Ann Simmons, here named "Alice W.;" Lamb appears at his merriest in "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig," a witty, fanciful account of the Chinese origin of roast pork as a food.

Their popularity occasioned a second series of twenty-five Elian essays, also largely published in *The London Magazine*, and issued in a single volume in 1833 as *The Last Essays of Elia* (item 41).
“The Superannuated Man” contains Lamb’s feelings upon retirement from the East India House; “The Wedding,” a favorite of Wordsworth, contrasts the happiness of a wedding with the loneliness of the old bachelor who gives away the bride; the popular “Old China,” with its excellent depiction of Mary, sets the great delight Elia and Bridget took in simple pleasures while living “just above poverty” against the meagre enjoyment they derive from small luxuries now permitted by relative affluence.

In 1823 Charles and Mary adopted Emma Isola, the orphaned daughter of a teacher of Italian. Her youthful presence brightened their lives, so frequently darkened in Charles’s last years as Mary’s attacks increased. During one such illness in 1831 he composed the comic ballad Satan in Search of a Wife (item 43). Edward Moxon, Lamb’s publisher, issued it anonymously—“By an Eye Witness”—but, to the writer’s chagrin, advertised it as “by the author of Elia.” The book lost money. In 1833 Moxon married Emma Isola.

Moxon brought out Lamb’s Album Verses in 1830 (item 42). Lamb wrote drolly of the popularity of the album:

’Tis a Book kept by modern Young Ladies for show,  
Of which their plain grandmothers nothing did know.  
A medley of scraps, half verse, and half prose,  
And some things not very like either, God knows.

Lamb’s contribution to this hybrid form had just the right mix: genuine “album verses,” “Miscellaneous” pieces, “Sonnets,” “Commendatory Verses,” “Acrostics,” translations from the Latin poems of Vincent Bourne, a “Pindaric Ode to the Tread Mill,” a poem entitled “Going or Gone,” and the play “A Wife’s Trial.”

On 27 December 1834 Charles Lamb died of an infection following a fall while out walking. Coleridge had preceded him in July at the age of sixty-two. Lamb eulogized his “fifty-years-old” friend as “the proof and touchstone” of all his “cogitations.” In Wordsworth’s opinion, Lamb’s death “was doubtless hastened by his sorrow for that of Coleridge.” Mary Lamb died on 20 May 1847 and was buried with her brother in Edmonton Churchyard, Greater London.

37. CHARLES LLOYD and CHARLES LAMB. Blank Verse. London: John and Arthur Arch, 1798.
The book is dedicated to Robert Southey. Included is Lamb’s famous poem, “The Old Familiar Faces,” with its reference in the first stanza to Mary’s slaying of their mother and its characterization later of Coleridge as “Friend of my bosom, thou more than a brother!” This volume belonged to Robert Lloyd, brother of Lamb’s collaborator, and carries his signature and the date 16 November 1809.


The engravings are by William Blake, after drawings by William Mulready.

Peal 9,691-9,692.


This work represents Lamb’s first attempt at writing for the stage. Inlaid is a short letter from Lamb to his friend John Tuff, commenting on the “thin houses” at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. Tuff compiled Historical, Topographical and Statistical Notices of Enfield (1858), where Charles and Mary Lamb lived from 1827 to 1833. The inscription on the title page, “Presented to Mr. Tuff by the Author,” is probably not in Lamb’s hand.

The John Tuff copy. Peal 5,038.


This is the first collected edition of the magazine essays, here shown in Lamb’s presentation copy to Allan Cunningham (1784-1842), dramatist, novelist, biographer, and poet. A slip glued to the front paste-down bears Lamb’s inscription, “Allan Cunningham Esq. with Elia’s best respects.” Tipped in before the title page is a short autograph letter inviting Cunningham to dinner and signed
“C. Lamb”; in his edition of Lamb’s letters, E.V. Lucas dates the manuscript 1821. Lamb ends the letter “with perfect sympathy,” a play on the title of the Elian essay “Imperfect Sympathies,” in which Lamb expresses such sentiments for the Scots, of whom Cunningham was one. Lucas suggests that the essay took its title from discussions between Lamb and Cunningham. Also tipped in is part of an autograph letter, dated 15 April 1822, and signed by S.A. Hessey, Elia’s publisher, referring to Cunningham’s drama Sir Marmaduke Maxwell, printed that year. This correspondence also mentions “imperfect sympathy.” The book later belonged to Cunningham’s son, Colonel Francis Cunningham (d. 1875), whose library also included Lamb’s copy of Beaumont and Fletcher’s Comedies and Tragedies, now in the British Library.

The Peal Collection also contains, from the library of A. Edward Newton, Lamb’s letter of receipt to James Hessey, dated 9 June 1824 (Peal 9,551), for payment of £35 for Elia.


41. CHARLES LAMB. The Last Essays of Elia. Being a Sequel to Essays Published under That Name. London: Edward Moxon, 1833.

This copy, a companion to an identically dressed volume of the earlier 1823 Elia (Peal 7,308), has been handsomely bound in full green levant morocco by the Club Bindery. Its features include a gilt tooled spine and borders on both covers, gilt inner dentelles, and gilt top edges.

Peal 7,309.

42. CHARLES LAMB. Album Verses, With a Few Others. London: Edward Moxon, 1830.

This is the dedication copy, preserved in its original brown boards with paper label. Pasted onto the dedication page is the autograph letter to Moxon, dated “Enfield, 1st June, 1830,” and signed “Charles Lamb,” that was published as the “Dedication” to the book. Lamb makes it clear that because Moxon suggested printing “these Trifles,” there was no one to whom a dedication was “more properly due.”
Charles Lamb's own copy of *Album Verses*, with corrections in his hand, is also in the Special Collections Department of the University of Kentucky Libraries.


This copy of Lamb's anonymous comic ballad is preserved in its original wrappers. On the back cover is an advertisement for *Album Verses*, along with other notices. Guarded over the authorship of *Satan in Search of a Wife*, he wrote Moxon on 11 February 1833, "I wish you would omit 'by the Author of Elia' now, in advertising that damn'd 'Devil's Wedding.'"


Talfourd (1795-1854), one of Lamb's many legal friends, served as an executor of Lamb's estate and became his original biographer. He named his first son Charles Lamb. As the subtitle explains, Talfourd chiefly printed "Letters Not Before Published, With Sketches of Some of His Companions." The half title of Volume I carries the presentation inscription "Mrs. Shelley—With the Publisher's best respects." Mary Godwin, daughter of Lamb's friend William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, became Percy Bysshe Shelley's second wife in 1816. She published *Frankenstein* two years later.


45. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 24 August 1797.

Lamb recounts a visit and a letter from Charles Lloyd (see item 37) who was agitated about thoughts of marriage to Sophia
Pemberton. After the two men had called on Southey, Lloyd departed for Birmingham, Sophia's home, to carry her off with Southey's assistance. Lloyd and Miss Pemberton were indeed married at last, but not until 1799.

Formerly in the collections of Ernest Dressel North and William Warren Carman. Peal 7,536.

46. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [12 May 1800].

The death of the Lambs' aged servant Hetty the previous Friday and Mary's confinement on Sunday for her first serious attack in thirteen months prompted this despondent letter from Lamb, "alone in a house with nothing but Hetty's dead body" to keep him company. Mary's condition, while only temporary, causes talk in the neighborhood and makes the Lambs "in a manner marked." These trying events affect Charles's sleep and leave him "completely shipwrecked." In this dark mood he concludes, "I almost wish that Mary were dead." One critic, surveying the Lamb correspondence, calls this letter "the one solitary instance in which Lamb allows us to see his patience and hopefulness fail him for a brief hour."

From the collection of Henry S. Borneman. Peal 9,555.

47. CHARLES and MARY LAMB. A.L.s. to Louisa Holcroft, 2 October 1828.

In this letter the Lambs inquire about Miss Holcroft's school for "little orphans," urging her to "Mind their morals first." Louisa Holcroft later married Thomas Carlyle's Birmingham friend, the chemist John Bradams. Signed "C. and M. Lamb," the letter was written by Charles Lamb, who begins by stating that Mary Lamb has "written her last Letter in this world."

From the collection of Henry S. Borneman. Peal 9,558.

48. MARY LAMB. A.L.s. to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [September 1806].

Coleridge's "silly very silly letter" and his smoking of a "Segar" with Lamb the night before have amused Mary greatly. "A few
cheerful [sic] evenings" spent with Coleridge "serves to bear up" the Lambs' spirits "many a long & weary year." She compliments Coleridge on his children, Derwent ("Pypos"), Sara, and Hartley, of whom she has heard "such favourable accounts" from Southey, Wordsworth, and Hazlitt.

This letter was once thought to have been in the British Museum; when the present document came to light, the British Museum's letter was investigated and found to be a contemporary copy.

From the collection of John Gribbel. Peal 8,568.

49. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Robert Southey, 9 August 1815.

The Battle of Waterloo had been fought on 18 June, and Lamb writes that he hears that "Bonaparte has sued for his Habeas Corpus, and the Twelve Judges are now sitting upon it at the Rolls." He also declares that the "Boute foy (Bonfire)" to celebrate the English victory "must be excellent of its kind"; Southey described the fire on Skiddaw on 21 August in a letter to his brother two days later.

Peal 9,095.

50. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to [John Scott?], 28 November 1814.

To his unnamed correspondent Lamb offers for possible printing an essay he had originally written for Leigh Hunt's Reflector, "but not published, owing to the stopping of that work." On 4 December 1814, John Scott published Lamb's essay "On the Melancholy of Tailors" in The Champion, of which he had just become editor, hence his identification as Lamb's correspondent. Scott (1783-1821) later edited The London Magazine, home to most of Lamb's Elia essays. Antagonism between Scott and John Gibson Lockhart of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine led to a duel between Scott and Lockhart's second, J.J. Christie, which ended in Scott's death.

Peal 14,196.

51. CHARLES LAMB. A.N.s. to Thomas Hood, [July 18217].
Lamb invites young Thomas Hood to tea: “Can you take your Tea with us? it is now pouring out. I want to restore your MS &c.”

As editor for several magazines, Hood (1799-1845) became friendly with many writers, including Hazlitt and De Quincey, but he reverenced Lamb above any other man. At Mrs. Hood’s request, Lamb wrote “On an Infant Dying as Soon as Born” at the death of their firstborn. Hood published the elegy in The Gem for 1829.

From the collection of Henry S. Borneman. Peal 9,561(a).

52. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Mrs. William Godwin, [early 1806?].

Having observed that Mr. Godwin is “a little fastidious in what he eats for supper,” Lamb sends “a piece of dried salmon” from the River Trent, along with a recipe. Godwin’s first wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, died in 1797 at the birth of her daughter Mary, Shelley’s future wife. In 1801 Godwin married Mrs. Mary Clairmont, Lamb’s correspondent, whose daughter by her first marriage, Claire Clairmont, bore Lord Byron a daughter, Allegra, in 1817.

From the collection of Frank Brewer Bemis. Peal 12,254.

53. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to William Godwin, 13 April 1822.

Lamb assures Godwin (1756-1836) that he will arrange for the political economist and “Numberer of the People” John Rickman to see Mr. Booth, author of Tables of Simple Interest (1818). Depending largely on Rickman’s research and assistance, Charles Abbot introduced the first Census Act in England in 1800. Lamb once said of—and to—Godwin that he had read more books of no worth than any man in England.

Peal 13,287.

54. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Joseph Cottle, 26 May 1820.

Lamb writes to the bookseller and publisher Joseph Cottle (1770-1853) to thank him for a gift, probably Cottle’s Fall of Cambria, a collection of poems published in 1807. He also commends Cottle’s recent Expostulatory Epistle to Lord Byron (who had ridiculed
Had I a power, Lady, to my will,
you should not want Hand Writing: I would fill
your leaves with Autographs — splendid names
of knights and Queens of old, and courtly Sires,
kings, Emperors, Popes. Near under these should stand
The hands of famous Lawyers; a brave band,
who in their bounds of Law or Equity
have best upheld Freedom and Property.
These should most cases in your book, and vie
To show their reading, and their Sagacity.
But I have none of these: nor can I stand
The notes by Bulken to her Tyrant Lord!
In her authentic hand, not in soft hand
Lines writ by Rosamund in Clifford's lawyer.
The lack of such rare Signatures I mean.
with scarce the courage to set down my own.

Ch. Lamb

Lamb's album verse for Mrs. Thomas Wilde (item 55)
Cottle's brother Amos—"Phoebus! what a name"—in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers). Lamb allows that he has "a thorough aversion" to Byron's character, and "a very moderate admiration of his genius—he is great in so small a way." Lamb has seen Southey "slightly" since his arrival on 1 May, but he hopes to see "much" of Wordsworth, who arrives in early June. Cottle printed works by Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. In his own note to English Bards Byron characterized the brothers Cottle as "once sellers of books they did not write, and now writers of books they do not sell."

Peal 9,377.

55. CHARLES LAMB. Holograph of untitled verses, signed, enclosed in an A.L.s. to Martin Charles Burney, 19 March 1829.

According to E.V. Lucas, Lamb penned these verses for the autograph book of Mrs. Thomas Wilde, née Wileman, first wife of Sir Thomas Wilde, afterwards Lord Truro. Burney, a barrister, outlined briefs for Wilde as they travelled the western circuit, where Lamb addressed his cover letter. Burney was the son of the original of Elia's "Mrs. Battle" and the brother of the bride in "The Wedding." Lamb dedicated the second volume of his Works to Burney in 1818.

Peal 10,502.

56. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to Mrs. Basil Montagu, [summer 1827].

A movement to raise a memorial to the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in his lifetime occasions Lamb's thoughts on "Monuments to goodness"; even those erected after the subject's death strike him as "equivocal." Lamb parodies the scheme with a counterproposal for a monument to himself to be financed by subscription. "I sat down upon a hillock at Forty Hill yesternight—a fine contemplative evening—with a thousand good speculations about mankind. How I yearned with cheap benevolence! I shall go and enquire of the stone cutter that cuts the tomb stones here what a stone with a short inscription will cost." In the meantime he subscribes a guinea for Clarkson, whose memorial was duly built above Wade Mill,
Hertfordshire, quite before his death. Mrs. Montagu's husband counted Wordsworth and Coleridge among his friends.
Peal 13,984.

57. CHARLES and MARY LAMB. A.L.s. to Thomas Allsop, [17 September 1823].

This letter to Allsop is initialed "C.L. & M.L." by Charles Lamb. The Lambs greatly appreciate Allsop's gift of "the delicatest rainbow-hued, melting piece" of Stilton cheese Lamb has ever "flavoured." Mary is at home, but "has gone back rather than improved." Allsop had previously presented Lamb with game, such as hares and pheasants. On another occasion, this "favourite disciple of Coleridge" lent Coleridge one hundred pounds, and later he compiled Letters, Conversations and Recollections of Coleridge (1836).

From the collection of Henry S. Borneman. Peal 9,556.

58. CHARLES LAMB. A.L.s. to John Childs, [15 September 1834].

Having sent his copy of Elia to someone in India, the printer John Childs (1783-1853) wrote Lamb to ask where he could procure another. Lamb replies that the book is "not to be had for love or money" and that only with difficulty had he obtained his present copy for himself. However, he offers to order his more recent Last Essays of Elia for Childs and even to lend him his "sole copy of the former volume (O! return it!) for a month or two." The letter carries the signature "Ch. Lamb alias Elia." Later correspondence indicates that Lamb forwarded Childs both books.

From the collection of John Gribbel. Peal 9,554.