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That "Vital Spark of Genius": Lady Caroline Lamb's Writing before Byron

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Lady Caroline Lamb's "vital spark of genius" (Morgan 2: 210) was recognized very early in her life by literary family members. Her Aunt Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire called Lady Caroline a "Fairy [or] sprite" and forecast that "Magic genius waits on thee." With the simple gift of a pencil for drawing and writing, the Duchess addressed these lines to her niece:

> Take the gift, the early year
> Shall for thee in Splendor shine.
> Genius gives it. Do not fear
> Boldly mould, invent, design.[1]

Here, we discuss the early writing life of Lady Caroline Lamb, found in her notebooks, commonplace books, poetry and letters. When reading poetic juvenilia, such as Keats's or Byron's, or prose juvenilia, such as Austen's or the Brontës', we may think of immature work, doggerel, narrative, or prose commentary, the inventiveness of which evinces the spark of a future published writer. Lamb writes verse and prose, and seems compelled to pick up her pencil and quill. Much of her juvenilia is deliberately nonsensical and creatively playful in an unselfconscious way characteristic of budding writers. Her early letters often slip into verse and linguistic experimentation, and her early poems show a precocious awareness of the conventions of the genre. Like the sketch-art and watercolors with which her notebooks are generously sown, her early writing exhibits a distinctive style. We believe that Lamb's juvenilia support the idea that she was a talented writer already practicing her craft before the notorious "Byron affair" of 1812.

That affair with Lord Byron tends to anchor the world's impression of Lamb. She has long been defined by it, and especially by a stream of criticism that stems from Byron, whom she described as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" — though he never heard that phrase in his lifetime (Morgan 2: 201).[2] When Lamb forged Byron's handwriting, signature, and style in a letter ostensibly to gain possession of his portrait, Byron was shocked and angered: "The Devil, & Medea, & her Dragons to boot, are possessed of that little maniac" (*BLJ* 2: 186). The forgery occurred not long after a bizarre Christmas celebration in Hertfordshire, where Lamb burned Byron in effigy in front of a gaggle of local

children. The poem recited on this occasion compared Byron to Guy Fawkes, a testimony to the fact that Lamb's early education was as much political as social and artistic. Byron's anger deepened and darkened when he became convinced that his ex-lover was spreading rumors concerning the dissolution of his marriage. This anger made him write some scathing things about her. One of his most severe blows would not be delivered, however, until after Byron's death when Thomas Medwin published a poem written in response to Lamb's inscribing the words of the ghost of Hamlet's father - "Remember me" — in the flyleaf of Byron's copy of *Vathek*. She had stolen into his rooms to write the line, and Byron exploded with this riposte:

> Remember thee, remember thee!
> Till Lethe quench life's burning stream,
> Remorse and shame shall cling to thee,
> And haunt thee like a feverish dream!
>
> Remember thee! Ay doubt it not.
> Thy husband too shall think of thee!
> By neither shalt thou be forgot,
> Thou *false* to him, thou *fiend* to me.[3]

Byron's posthumously published vitriol set the tone subsequent critics took toward Lamb and her literary efforts, until very recently.

In the mid-twentieth century, David Cecil, biographer of William Lamb, described Lamb as "the most dynamic personality that had appeared in London in a generation" (70). What this dynamism meant is illustrated in Cecil's portrait of William Lamb as essentially a "lunatic's guardian" (162). Other biographers concurred. Elizabeth Lee thought Lamb talented, but neglectful of her family, and actually imagined herself admonishing the wayward mother. Doris Langley Moore portrayed Lamb as "guileful, tenacious, and vindictive," a "declassée" woman for whom "violations of good taste were irresistible" and who made gestures of magnanimity that were "perfectly empty." She also charged her, based on a letter of Lamb's to Byron describing her pain at his aloofness, with a sexual aggression that frightened Byron (Moore 227, 230-31). Moore's *The Late Lord Byron* (1961) influenced Dorothy Marshall, who wrote that Lamb ought to have been given a "sharp slap judiciously administered" (43). Henry Blyth's *Caro: The Fatal Passion* (1972) also concluded that William should have beaten and slapped her, for such treatment "might have brought her to her senses" (231).

Balancing the view of Lamb as having suffered from a lack of sufficient corporal punishment, recent essays by Peter Graham, Frances Wilson, and John Clubbe have been respectful and even sympathetic to her talent. Following on that path, a biography and a selection of letters by one of the present writers has attempted to show that the exaggeration of Lamb's wildness and

vengefulness eclipsed her human dimension and made us neglect her writerly talents. *Lady Caroline Lamb: A Biography* alludes to some of Lamb's youthful poems, chiefly to illustrate the development of her character, but does not sufficiently explore the promise of these early efforts. *The Whole Disgraceful Truth: Selected Letters of Lady Caroline Lamb* includes approximately two hundred of Lady Caroline's letters, some composed in or containing verse. Again, however, it does not explore the abundant juvenilia this essay assesses. Eventually, Lamb would publish three novels, two parodies of Byron's poetry, several poems in literary journals, and a number of songs — besides working up three other novel projects and a book on "domestic economy," which was printed in England and which Lamb sought to publish in Ireland (see Douglass xiii). We hope to fill in the picture of Lamb's early development as a writer, and we will argue that Lamb wrote for herself and on her own terms. She was not merely a woman prompted to write by Byron — nor one who wrote only about him.

Lamb received a good, if uneven education at the hands of her mother, grandmother, and various tutors. She knew Italian and was fluent in French. She composed lyrics in French and copied Italian songs, like those of librettist Faustina Maratti Zappi (1679-1745), into gift-books intended for her cousins and, later on, for Byron. She was impressed by her Aunt Georgiana's novels, *Emma; or, the Unfortunate Attachment* (1773) and *The Sylph* (1779). Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, also wrote songs that were sold as sheet music, and Lamb would emulate her aunt in this pursuit, working primarily with Isaac Nathan, music librarian to the royal court. Lamb also read Goethe, Young, and Pope, as well as Edgeworth, Morgan, and Dacre at a remarkably young age.

As a child, Lamb was perhaps closest to her cousins Hart, the Marquis of Hartington (future sixth Duke of Devonshire), and Georgiana (called "Little G" by the family to distinguish her from her mother, the Duchess). Young Caroline wrote often to G, or "Jarry" as she sometimes called her, and these letters reveal that the cousins lived in a world far more stable and less chaotic than one would ever guess from the sensationalized descriptions that have been repeated over the years by chroniclers of the Regency. The Bessborough and Devonshire *ménage* gave young children almost instant sophistication. Here is a sample of eleven-year-old Lamb's writing style, composed on Twelfth Night, 1797:

> Oh sweetest devel tis now my turn to write to you what you should burn . . .
> I'm mad
> that's bad
> I'm sad

> That's bad
> I'm bad
> That's mad . . .
> mon Dieu tis twelve night a damp moon chilled me
> oh good gods I here declare never more in letters for to swear
> . . . tis shame dishonour base and wrong to thus continue all along
> what we should not at first have begun but now we'll end it as its wrong but
> swear with me on this moment that by the Earth and by the reform never
> more to swear and then do it if you dare.[5]

This early letter shows that she had come across the formula for her later description of Byron as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" long before she met him. It also reveals that many oaths and much swearing characterized the cousins' speech. Swearing comes up repeatedly in these letters, and she shows impressive creativity with onerous epithets. As we shall see, this talent for invective she shared with Byron.

Satire and mockery went hand in hand with swearing. When her family hired a nurse, Mary Johnson, to discipline Caroline, she retaliated in writing by parodying the woman's stuttering: "I'm sure I wish Mrs. Johnnnnnnnnson with all her stutterage was at the devel," she told her cousin G:

> oh good God Jarry I never knew such a confounded formal affected old maiden stut[t]ering little tyrant . . . I thought I could have bit her with rage [—] if any thing happens of impertinence as she calls it why then she's as red as fire she stutters pite piter piter pCarpipidy pte pte Caropipiline pte piter has pi pi piter piter long been pter pte pter in twa twa tway this way . . . I I I am positive [—] I think to myself the Devel would have a good wife . . . (*TWDT* 8-9)

These letters show Caroline was a remarkably fluent eleven year old who could write with confidence and rhetorical power. Though at this age she was often in conflict with her tutors and nurses, she did much reading, including Samuel Rogers' *The Pleasures of Memory*, Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, Samuel Richardson's daunting *Clarissa*, and Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. *Clarissa*, for example, she declared chock full of "silly wit."[6] Literary mimicry and creativity followed naturally from her impersonation of the voices of her nursemaid, cousins, and family acquaintances. Her epistolary style shifts quickly from an imitation of the Devonshire baby talk to the grammar of common laborers to the sophisticated prose of Richardson and Johnson:

> A thousand pardons, dearest Georgiana, for not writing sooner, for *'oo* know *dearest 'ove* that I *'ave* so *'ittle* time for *'ose* things *'at* it is impossible for me to *'ite.*
>
> I have been studying to make meself Mad and uncommon and evrything that's dear and delightful but Have not been able to attain the perfection of giving all the House a Headache. (Gower 1-2)

Caroline mimics the affected accent of Lady Elizabeth Hervey and, together with satirical comments on the pastimes of ladies, adapts a character to write a comic letter to "G." The message creates a sense of collusion by the young girls against the odd but fascinating world of adults and the Whig circles in which they moved. Young Caroline, tutored by female relatives and irritating governesses but also at a school in Hans Place, London, effectively laughs at ladies who learn when they don't have to. Mixed together in her diet of reading and writing was also a tomboyish earthiness readily observed in her relationship to three brothers, who, before they departed for Harrow in late 1797, went hunting for rats: "John threw me a dead one which blooded me," reported Caroline matter-of-factly to G, stating, "I am setting traps all over the house to get a mouse" (*TWDT* 9).

By the age of twelve, Caroline had mastered the pencil her Aunt had given her. She had also been initiated into the grand frustrations of the Whig political reform movement, which for years had commanded the attention of her mother, Lady Bessborough. A 1797 bill to mitigate corruption in Parliamentary elections was introduced by one of the heroes of the reform movement, Charles Grey, but it was soundly beaten back on a 237 to 91 vote. This failed effort at reform provides the backdrop for one of Caroline's letters written in late 1797: "[A] reform a reform did you write a reform[?] . . . Sweet G, we will reform but not till we meet[.] [W]hat must good children write . . . we can reform we are not corrupted at any time but I disdain to reform at this time I will reform in heart but not in hand, I will reform myself but not my letters. oh you lilly liverd girl . . . " (*TWDT* 10). This letter is filled with a bravado born of confidence in her place in the hearts of her parents and her brothers, whom she describes with affection as often staying up late after their mother had retired: "John Fred Will[7] and I generally raill out a song with a machine that would frighten you in the great hall while the Men drink in the dining room . . ." (*TWDT* 11).

Lamb's early letters are written in a muscular, self-consciously witty style. They also show a preoccupation with rhyme that might or might not be arranged formally:

> . . . all the devels demons say make Hartington say in his days he never knew what love could be till he did know his sister G[,] then let him swear by suns by skies that if he can believe his eyes or else deucedly mistaken be if he e'er saw a girl like G and none in swearing doth exel and that he swears by ladies well except one else that is named C [—] she can almost as well as he. (*TWDT* 11)

A letter was a performance, and Caroline's bravado sputtered when she reflected on her readers' possible reactions to her outrageousness. She concluded this last one by begging little G not to be "bored to read this letter," and in-

stead to "burn it in some furnace or fire . . . powder into dust and if there must be that why then there must [—] die die forever oh this stupid foolish little bit of paper" (*TWDT* 11). The scraps of paper proliferated, however, and few were burned as she demanded.

As she matured, Caroline became more consciously literary in her letters and poems. She did not forget the reform movement nor her eldest brother Frederick's military career, but she became aware of the literary marketplace, which was changing rapidly. At sixteen she wrote to G that she had heard of a new periodical to be called *The Edinburgh Review*: "Have you seen the Edinborough review I hear it is very good — written by some young men of that place and full of very just Criticisms on many new plays and Books" (*TWDT* 13). In this same period the family considered fleeing to America if reports of a French invasion of Ireland proved true, and yet Caroline was much more interested in opera, drama, poetry, and fiction. She started numerous gift-books filled with poetry and other writings, and illustrated with her own drawings.[8]

One example is a poem Caroline copied into a gift-book for her cousin G. It concerns a lost place of virtue and simple contentment that she names "Mallakide":

> Ne'er since that day do bright appear
> The beauties of the vernal year[—]
> So sweet the feather[e]d songsters love
> So fresh the breeze so green the grove
> So bright the meadows' flowery pride[—]
> As erst they did at Mallakide —
>
> For ah — in fashion's giddy round
> Lost peace of mind I have not found —
> I have not found esteem sincere,
> The social smile the pitying tear —
> And all life's choicest joys beside
> I left alas! at Mallakide — — [9]

Most of the poems written before Lamb turned nineteen are imitative. She was keenly aware that they were often not wholly successful, and that she was rehearsing well-worn themes. "[F]rom an Infant I wrote Rhimes," she later told Byron, "as you see — much as shoe blacks & bell men & love sick Maidens when abandoned oftentimes break out in" (*TWDT* 82). But this estimate is belied by the smoothness of the literary surface she creates out of simple materials and natural rhythms: "So fresh the breeze, so green the grove / So bright the meadows' flowery pride." Perhaps she had studied Wordsworth's contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, for the simplicity of "Mallakide" evokes such poems as "Anecdote for Fathers" or "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House" [later "To My Sister"]:

It is the first mild day of March,
Each minute sweeter than before,
The redbreast sings from the tall larch
That stands beside our door. (Wordsworth 63)

Despite the accomplishment of "Mallakide," Lamb continued to denigrate her own efforts, for example in a letter to Byron's future bride, Annabella Milbanke:

> [M]y beautiful Rhapsodies like every thing else I do — burst forth on every event to perish with it — witness all the Elegies I have written since five years old for every dog cat monkey & squirrel that left this goodly world & where is the young Lady who has not addrest Cynthia bright Goddess — Hygea — innocen[t] Doves — Lambs playing on the Green — the return of Spring — the Fall of the Leaf — a cow ruminating after its dinner & all the other Images that awaken sympathetic emotions in the youthful heart . . .[10]

Her awareness of her own limitations is expressed here in terms so evocative that they make her confession of artistic inadequacy seem untrue. Even in detailing such a time-honored scene as feminine betrayal, Lamb manages a note of originality and feminist demurral:

Yet trust her not, though fair and young,
Man has so many true hearts grieved
That Woman thinks she does no wrong
When she is false and he deceived.[11]

In their tough grace, and the nuanced phrase, "Woman *thinks* she does no wrong," these four lines achieve more than many other poems do in fourteen. This poem in quatrains compares favorably with the published work of Charlotte Dacre, whose *Hours of Solitude* (1805) would influence Byron's own juvenilia. Consider, for example, Dacre's "The Vanity of Hope":

Since to hope for true love is but folly,
  And woman's the plaything of man,
My soul sinks in deep melancholy,
  Corroding my life's little span. (Dacre 1: 24)

In rhythm, economy, and originality, Lamb's verse excels Dacre's.

Again, despite her ability, Lamb found herself prey to the common doubts of young writers, who, the more they learn, the more they despair of achieving originality. Lamb's humility at the ordinariness of her themes was deepened by her study of Greek and Latin. She made translations from the classical languages, having been tutored by her husband and Lady Oxford, as for example, in this passage from Ovid's "Art of Love," which she included in one of her gift-books:

Sport while the years are thine and while ye may.
Years like the stream flow unperceived away.
The wave returns not to the fountainhead
Nor comes again the hour which once has fled . . .[12]

These gift-books by Lamb exhibit what she felt were her early literary accomplishments and became a repository of reflection for her — and now for us. While much of this material is indeed callow, we find also that some of it rivals the juvenilia and even the published work of established male poets of the period. A number of the gift-books are held in Hertford County Hall, where papers were deposited from Brocket Hall, the Lamb family country home in which she spent several years after her marriage in 1805. The books are filled with juvenilia, though they were compiled much later in life, most likely when Lamb "retired" to Brocket in 1825.

One is a poetry notebook which contains a dedicatory letter to a "Mrs Howe," probably a close friend of Lamb's grandmother, Lady Spencer.[13] This notebook has been made either by someone at Brocket or by Lamb herself: it is assembled from paper upon which Lamb would otherwise have written letters. Eighteen gilt-edged sheets of creamy yellow writing paper have been cut in half and stacked on top of one another. A slightly larger and thicker sheet of paper has been folded in half and placed underneath the "leaves" of the booklet to form a protective cover. The leaves and cover have then been folded in half and stitched down the "spine."[14] On the first page of her book[15] Lamb has written, in superscript to the poem that follows, "The first verse I ever wrote" — apparently composed before she was fifteen years old:

> Oh balm of nature to the mind opprest
> Descend & calm the tumult of my breast
> Bind with oblivious vail [sic] these wakeful Eyes
> And still the varying passions as they rise
> While dreams of love & fairy fictions light
> Sport with the gloomy darkness of the night
> While cherub Angels borne on silver wing
> To Heavens high arch their songs of triumph sing
> Oh Sleep descend & on thy downy breast
> Lull with thy poppy wreath my soul to rest[16]

As juvenilia, these lines show a surprising maturity: a canny ear tuned to variants of rhythm that avoid monotony and evoke a natural voice, as in the final line, which avoids the regular iambic beat of the penultimate line; that line itself ("Oh Sleep descend . . .") is an example of several metrically regular ones interspersed throughout the poem with lines that skillfully vary the rhythm ("Bind with oblivious vail . . ." and "To Heaven's high arch . . . ," for example). The poem also exhibits several striking phrases which seem almost Imagist in their precision: "the mind opprest," "sport with the gloomy darkness," and "lull with thy poppy wreath."

Lamb's invocation to Sleep is, moreover, remarkably similar to Keats's "Sonnet to Sleep" and shows a mastery of literary imagery similar to what the male poet achieved at age twenty-three:

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting with careful fingers and benign
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,
In midst of this thine Hymn, my willing Eyes,
Or wait the "Amen" ere thy poppy throws
Around my bed its lulling charities.
Then save me or the passèd day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes;
Save me from curious conscience, that still hoards
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like the mole;
Turn the key deftly in the oilèd wards,
And seal the hushèd casket of my soul. (Keats 284)

Both invocations — "Oh balm of nature," "O soft embalmer" — address Sleep as a personified spirit who will bring rest and recuperation to a troubled speaker: it will calm the "tumult of [Lamb's] breast" and "still [her] varying passions"; it will "Save [Keats] from [his] curious conscience." The spirit of Sleep is addressed as a divinity: Keats writes a Hymn to sleep; Lamb's panegyric figures Sleep descending from the Heavens surrounded by cherub Angels. Lamb asks for an "oblivious vail" to cover her "wakeful Eyes" whereas Keats requests Sleep to simply "close his willing Eyes." Lamb's eyes being bound with an oblivious veil corresponds to Keats's eyes being shut with careful fingers, but as her eyes are "wakeful" as opposed to "willing," her invocation seems more plaintive. Both poets are distracted from sleep by the everyday realities of their lives. Lamb's "dreams of love & fairy fictions light / Sport with the gloomy darkness of the night," while Keats writes, "Then save me or the passèd day will shine / Upon my pillow, breeding many woes," which keep the poet from soothing sleep. Although both poems seem to offer a panegyric to the spirit of Sleep, the writers both also allude to medicinal opium. Lamb desires that Sleep should "Lull with thy poppy wreath," and Keats imagines how Sleep's "poppy throws / Around my bed its lulling charities." These references to a soporific drug somewhat undermine the image of Sleep as a "balm of *nature*" and a "*soft* embalmer."

Both poems end with dark imagery of eternal rest and perhaps death, with Keats's sealing of the "hushèd casket" of his soul and Lamb's request that her soul be lulled to rest by a "poppy wreath." Keats's "Sonnet to Sleep," written in April 1821 — during the poet's "living year" when he was twenty-three — is one of his more mature works in which he experiments with the sonnet form, specifically what he viewed as the inadequacies of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms. As Robert Gittings shows, Keats also consciously alludes to his personal reading in this sonnet: it shows marked similarities with Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Gittings 126). Lamb's allusions are less obvi-

ous, but again, the poetical tropes of her invocation are common to many works she would have been reading at this time, for example, Goethe's *Faust* Part 1, Pope's *Essay on Man*, and Thomas Warton's *Ode to Sleep*.

Above her invocation to Sleep Lamb has drawn the symbol of a cross. On page eighteen of her poetry book is a note to her reader: "all those written with a + were written before I was fifteen or just after — I send them . . . but they are full of faults."[17] Several of the poems marked with a cross offer justification for their perceived immaturity. A poem to "G^{d}Mama" is full of late eighteenth-century tropes and poetic conventions. The subject of the poem is "Spring" and the restorative joy that this season brings, and it brims with phrases such as "azure skies," "Spring's genial breast," "Pleasure's garland," "bloom of youth" and "blush of youth."[18] Another, "on the story of a poor girl returnd to her Parents / by Car Ponsonby," is one Lamb thought "mawkish." It begins

> oh if this hand could strike the warbling Lyre
> What theme what subject should my theme inspire
> Not modern friendship order to love or sleep
> Desponding shepherds or forsaken sheep.[19]

But when we compare the verse of her era to what she has attempted here, we can recognize her conscious struggle not to fall into the mold cast by her predecessors and contemporaries — that is, not to write of stock characters in stock surroundings.

Lamb has included the "cross" poems in her gift-book, according to the note, "because you desired [them]." She recognized that the juvenilia collected here reveals an immature writer, but that some of this work perhaps also demonstrated a "spark" of the adult writer. One, "by Car Ponsonby / in a Passion to Caroline de St Jules," shows something of the spirited anger which Lamb would later direct in her letters to her mother-in-law, Lady Melbourne:

> . . . nor think I jest
> when thus I pluck thy friendship from my breast
> There is a string when touched that wakes my ire
> Boils up my blood, & sets my soul on fire[20]

Another "cross" poem in this gift-book — so, "written before . . . fifteen or just after" — contains moments of remarkable lyricism:

> Dreams of delight my youthful fancy drew
> Love, how ideal — friendship, how untrue —
> No more this stubborn soul shall bear for you
> Your boasted power is over
> To the greenwood I'll repair
> There unbind my yellow hair
> Breathing free my native air
> Come follow me — Dog Rover

No fond illusion this proud heart shall swell
No shepherd shall his plaintive story tell
or teach it on some tender theme to dwell
Such soft tales prosper never
But health shall teach us our hearts to beat
And nature deck our savage seat
While calm in this secure retreat
We'll leave this world for ever

In summer heats on moss grown banks we'll lie
And smile to think of human vanity
Enjoying well our nations liberty
Come follow me — Dog Rover
But oh if Memory return
And teach our hearts again to burn
Of what avail a life so stern
Our joys will then be over[21]

Phrases such as "human vanity" and "nations liberty" seem oddly dislocated in this pastoral lyric, but we should remember that at the time Lamb was writing this — around 1800 — she was also writing to G of reform and revolution, as illustrated in the letter of 1797 quoted above. The simplicity of some of the lines in this work echoes that of contemporary lyrical ballads:

To the greenwood I'll repair
There unbind my yellow hair
Breathing free my native air
Come follow me — Dog Rover

The medieval "greenwood" evokes the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* and hints at the political radicalism which developed later in the century. There is also an ethereally spiritual tone to this ballad in the line, "We'll leave this world for ever." The poem is dedicated "To a lanky Cur I Lov'd at that time —," with a sketch of a dog (perhaps a Bassett hound?) above it. A fairy perches on top of this dog — Dog Rover — adding to the mysterious whimsy of these lines. The conscious imitation of contemporary literary imagery and balladic versification that we find here later flowed into her most successful mature poetry, *A New Canto* (1819) and *Gordon: A Tale* (1821). It was a technique that Lamb would hone as part of her textual war with Byron.

Many of the poems in this notebook are headed by miniature sketches, a few centimeters square, executed in pencil and often filled in with colored ink or watercolors. These illustrations to the poems help to create the notebook as a presentation copy or gift-book. They also create an aesthetic effect reminiscent of Blake's illuminated books, such as *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the verses of which are sometimes echoed in Lamb's choice of rhythm and diction:

Winged with Hope & hushed with Joy.
See yon wanton blue-eyed boy

> Arch his smile, & keen his dart
> Aim at Laura's youthful heart!
> How could he his wiles disguise
> How deceive such watchful eyes?
> How so pure a breast inspire,
> Set so young a Mind on fire?[22]

The rhythms and sounds of Blake's "The Tyger" linger here. Another poem completes this thought, as the anguished speaker confronts her lover:

> Now I know thee tyrant boy
> Who can worlds of bliss destroy
> Yet oh speak tho' all in vain
> Speak and bless me once again
> Better twice a dupe to prove
> Than view the alter'd looks of love.[23]

Lamb's husband, William, was probably that wanton boy whose protestations of holding only her best interests at heart served as an excuse for cultivating her cynicism. Lamb has captured a lover's dilemma in a few concise lines similar to those of Blake's "On Another's Sorrow": "O! he gives to us his joy, / That our grief he may destroy . . ." (Blake 17).

The poetry in Lamb's gift-book in the Hertfordshire Archives is a mixed selection, with "cross" poetry from Lamb's early writing years, juvenile verse, and other verses (like those just quoted) headed with another indecipherable symbol, amalgamated perhaps of Greek and Arabic symbols, similar to "*φ7*." Composition dates for these poems are provided ("1812," "1812, October," and "1813"): significant dates which mean that the poems were probably written during and just after the Byron affair, but before Lamb developed a serious interest in publishing. In the draft letter to her anticipated reader ("Mrs Howe"), Lamb writes

> I never write now — I cannot — & these
> can only be pretty from their having
> been done at the moment — those
> *φ7* are the only later ones I
> have & these I remember for
> I hate to write them down[24]

This melancholy letter functions as an apologia for the poetry notebook. It also offers a much later date for compilation: Lamb says she "never write[s] now" which implies that the gift-book was collected after her prolific publishing period, which ended in 1823. It also shows that the making of gift-books — with juvenilia and miniature watercolor illustrations — was a project Lamb pursued all her life, from the childhood gift-books to G, to the letter book to Byron, to the much later gift-books in the Hertfordshire Archives. The poems marked "*φ7*," Lamb identifies as being "later" ones, yet they remain part of her early writing period (to around 1812). In these highly emotive early po-

ems — and ones from earlier still — Lamb worked out her writerly techniques and rehearsed expressions of suffering and the universal psychology of rejected love that would be polished in later works like *Glenarvon* (1816) and *Graham Hamilton* (1822).

Concerning the topics of Lamb's juvenilia, we wish to emphasize that the themes of betrayal and jealousy that surface so strongly in Lamb's novel *Glenarvon* were ubiquitous in her work long before she met Byron. Lamb's prior experiences gave her an intense awareness of these themes. She knew that her cousin Hart had been so devastated when he learned of Caroline's betrothal to William Lamb that he had to be sedated (Douglass 46). As the years went by, she also came to understand that Hart would never marry. Seeking support and collusion, Lamb often wrote him mock-confessions of her treacherous abandonment, evoking their childhood world of daydreams, now destroyed, like the mystic "Mallakide":

> The wand was broke her elves dismiss'd
> The Deamons yell'd — the serpents hist
> The skies were black the thunder roar'd
> When sad Titania left her lord . . . (*TWDT* 18)

The cadence here is reminiscent of Walter Scott's later narrative poem *Marmion* (1808), though used to evoke chaos rather than Scott's quiescent scene of ruin:

> Now is the stately column broke,
> The beacon-light is quenched in smoke,
> The trumpet's silver sound is still,
> The warder silent on the hill! (1.105-8)

Lamb's speaker continues in the elegiac mode appropriate to her theme of guilt and confession, as Titania, weeping, "in plaints both loud and long / To stones address'd her mournful song":

> What since befel her no one knows
> but certain 'tis overwhelmed with woes
> she deeply mourns her broken vows. (*TWDT* 19)

In the gift-book to her cousin G, Lamb also dwelt upon the guilt she felt at having taken William away from what she perceived as his first and truest love, for she knew that William had once been strongly attracted to her cousin G:

> Love with unerring cunning aimed the dart
> And struck with fatal force this guilty heart
> Since then to Phrensy with its passions fired
> Loving unloved, admiring unadmired
> Lost to the joys of youth unblest I rove
> Scornd by my friend, abandoned by my love.[25]

These largely autobiographical tones were characteristic of Lamb's verse, and they emerged strongly at least two years before she met Byron, in 1810, when

she had an affair with Sir Godfrey Vassal Webster. It did not require Byron to acquaint her with her own "Phrensy," nor with feelings of being unloved, scorned, and abandoned.

The Webster affair, which preceded the Byron affair, began in 1810. It gave rise to poems that sound remarkably like those Lamb would later write about her relationship with Byron:

> Since I no longer little John can send
> And all unmeant I did that night offend [—]
> Without too much regarding sex — or age
> Accept the bearer he shall be your Page[.]
> Near to your heart oh place the boy I send you
> Screen him from censuring eye & hold him dear
> Round all the World faithful he shall attend you
> Cause you to smile or sooth[e] the falling tear — [26]

This poem is inscribed "1810," but "1812" has been overwritten in pencil, perhaps by a researcher or archivist who thought that Lamb's cross-dressing fantasies only emerged during her affair with Byron. The poem's dedication has been partly scribbled out with ink, but it would appear it was to "Sir G[odfrey]." Lamb's family tried repeatedly to force her to end the affair with Webster. Her poetry reflects these themes of guilty ardor. Other poems that date to the Webster affair have also been mistaken as relating to Byron. For example, this poem has had its date changed from 1811 to 1812:

> Black are the locks that o'er his even brow
> Shade the blue eyes that tempt the heart to rove
> Red are the cheeks that health has taught to glow,
> His lips know only how to speak of love
> Oh he has every power has every art
> To captivate a Womans fickle heart[27]

In yet another poem firmly dated to this period, and not tampered with by any subsequent researcher, Lamb considers the fate of the woman left behind:

> The Moon shines so fair it reminds me of thee
> But the clouds that obscure it are emblems of me,
> They will pass like the dreams of our pleasures & youth —
> They will pass like the promise of honour & truth
> And bright thou shalt shine when these shadows are gone
> All radiant serene unobscured but — alone[28]

This poem employs the anapestic tetrameter which would later animate Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacharib" and which Scott had used three years earlier to good effect in Lady Heron's song in Canto V of *Marmion*: "Lochinvar": "Oh! Young Lochinvar is come out of the west, / Through all the wide Border his steed was the best," etc. (5.313-14). Lamb later used parts of this poem (dating from 1811) to compose a lyric titled "My Heart's Fit to Break," which she published in *Glenarvon*. Like all good fiction writers, Lamb employed

whatever experiences she needed to form her account of a destructive love affair and its consequences for a married woman. The inspiration for *Glenarvon*, we must recognize, is not only her affair with Byron.

A poem in the Hertfordshire gift-book, marked "φ7" and dated "1812," may also be read as evidence of Lamb's being a productive and industrious writer who developed her own themes and images with an awareness of their literary use and who was consciously responding to the work of established writers. The inspiration for the verse appears to be Pope's *Essay on Man* and presumably postdates the Byron affair. In a commonplace book from 1812-1814 (one intended to be given to Byron), Lamb has quoted directly from Pope's *Essay*:

> The Lamb thy riot dooms to bleed today
> Had he thy reason would he skip & play
> Pleas'd to the last he cropp's the flowery food
> And licks the hand uprais'd to shed his blood[.][29]

In the poetry notebook Lamb revises this quotation:

> a little Lamb there was that from its birth
> Had cropp'd the daintiest Fruits & flowers of Earth
> Fed by the Shepherds — by its Friends carest
> of every Joy & happiness possest —
> Till wandering from its Fold it chanc'd to stray
> Through errors flowery, but deceitful way
> Chaff'd were its limbs to kindlier usage bred
> Mock'd at and scorn'd it droop'd its weary head
> and all its pleasures all its spirits fled — [30]

These lines comprise an allegorical retelling of Lamb's own life, possibly written in a moment of reflection and fleeting contrition. Society gossip about the Lamb/Byron affair of 1812 is alluded to when the "little Lamb" is "mock'd at and scorn'd." Within five pages of this poem Lamb writes the phrases quoted earlier: "those [marked] φ7 are the only later ones I have & these I remember for I hate to write them down." Her choice to include a poem inspired by the Byron affair among her juvenilia indicates perhaps that she never lost the sense of possessing an immature talent.

The function of Lady Caroline Lamb in literary history has demanded that her early years, her marriage and domestic life, and even her literary achievements be ignored except when they are useful in painting her as an erotic but vengeful madwoman. It seems as though biography and criticism have generally fulfilled Byron's wish that Lamb be silenced. In a letter to Lady Melbourne of 16 May 1814, Byron wrote: "[A]s I heard a girl say the other night at Othello — when I asked her how she liked it — 'I shall like it much better when that woman (a bad actress in Desdemona) is fairly smothered' . . . " (*BLJ* 4: 116). Byron perhaps did not intend the language of incarceration and homicide — a

signal of the talent for invective he shared with his annoying ex-lover — to have the effect of trapping Lamb in the role of the feminine victim, the perpetual "Byron woman." Nonetheless, she was trapped. Documents held in archives around Britain offer evidence that Lamb was in truth a developing writer and also go some way to dispel the commonly held belief that she was prompted to write only because of her affair with the famous poet. Her juvenilia — letters, poetry and illustrated works — demonstrate that she was a writer before Byron, though her decision to publish seems to have been galvanized by her frustrated love for him.

After 1812 and into the mid-1820s, Lamb produced all of her mature work: wonderfully readable and entertaining letters, three novels, ten song lyrics, and two long poems — all complete by 1823. Lamb did not stop writing after her intense but brief years of publishing. Letters to John Murray and Henry Colburn continually discuss plans for future work, including three more novels and her pocket book on "domestic economy" mentioned above. Yet the fact remains that, after *Ada Reis* (1823), we know of nothing else that appeared in print in her lifetime. The records of her youth and the early years of her marriage show someone with brains and talent struggling to cultivate her literary skills. She was a writer in the making, but her career was derailed when she became a "Byron woman." She knew it, too. After she had finished *Ada Reis*, she wrote to her friend Lady Morgan that she recognized the "magic genius" of her youth had failed to mature into a socially acceptable talent: "[E]verybody wishes to run down and suppress the vital spark of genius I have, and, in truth, it is but small (about what one sees a maid gets by excessive beating on a tinder-box)" (*TWDT* 190). To this sobering self-assessment Lady Caroline Lamb added simply, "I am not vain, believe me, nor selfish, nor in love with my authorship; but I am independent, as far as a mite and bit of dust can be" (*TWDT* 190). No one was more aware than she of her own artistic limitations, yet line after line, her juvenilia does give off those sparks of independence and originality for which she longed.

Notes

1. Text is from The Osborn Collection of Yale University's Special Collections and dates to Lady Caroline Lamb's early childhood, though the precise moment is unknown.

2. Both Lamb and Byron wrote journals and memoirs which were subsequently lost or destroyed. Lamb claimed that she noted her impression of Byron as "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" in her journal after first seeing him. It is tempting to think that this phrase may have been repeated or that perhaps he read her journal when we note that Byron wrote to Lady Melbourne of Lamb as a "mad or bad woman" (see Byron to Lady Melbourne, 26 June 1814 in Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 4:132-33. References to this work by volume and page number will appear in the text with the short form "*BLJ*.")

3. George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, 3: 84.

4. All editorial emendations in these letters are indicated by brackets.

5. Lady Caroline Ponsonby to Lady Georgiana Cavendish, 7 January 1797, in Lady Caroline Lamb, *The Whole Disgraceful Truth*, 7-8. Further references to this edition will appear in the text with the short title "*TWDT*."

6. Lady Caroline Ponsonby to Lady Georgiana Cavendish [1797–1798], Castle Howard Archives, J18/35/90A.

7. Lady Caroline's three brothers, John William (Lord Duncannon as heir to the Bessborough estate), Frederick (later a hero of Waterloo), and Willy (her favorite), two years her junior.

8. Examples of these books can be found in the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Office, the Bessborough Papers in West Sussex, and in the Castle Howard Archives, Yorkshire.

9. Lady Caroline Lamb, a book of poetry, drawings, fiction and commentary compiled for her cousin, Georgiana, Lady Morpeth, the future sixth Countess of Carlisle, 1807, Castle Howard MSS J18/71/1.

10. Lady Caroline Lamb, Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 22 May 1812, Bodleian, Dep. Lovelace Byron 359.

11. A version of this poem, in four quatrains, is in the gift-book of Lamb's poetry (discussed below) held in the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Office, where it is given the title "The Walze" and an epigraph: "Honi soit qui mal y pense [Shame be to him who thinks this evil]," which is the motto of the Royal Order of the Garter (D/ELb F64). The poem here is not dated.

12. This passage from Ovid's "Art of Love" occurs in the gift-book at Castle Howard, MSS J18/71/1.

13. This probable identification of Mrs. Howe is drawn from Gower 15.

14. The booklet is approximately 20 cm. x 12 cm. in dimension when closed, with seventy-two leaves. The front cover page has previously been a title page. This has either been torn or razored off leaving an uneven edge along the bound spine and only a single letter — a "w" approximately halfway down the left-hand edge — remains of what once was the title or dedication.

15. We have assigned numbers to the pages of this booklet for the purposes of this essay. Lamb writes the first poem on the first gilt-edged sheet inside the cover, which would usually be called the fly-leaf. We have numbered this page one. She writes the majority of the poetry on odd-numbered pages, so that each poem is written on the right-hand page of the open book.

16. Lady Caroline Lamb, Book of Poetry, Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Office, D/ELb F64, p. 1.

17. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 18.

18. Lamb, Book of Poetry, pp. 47-49.

19. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 23. This poem's first line, "oh if this hand could strike the warbling Lyre," casts the mold for the first lines of her verse-epistle to Lord Byron, written in March 1812: "Oh that like thee Childe Harold I had power / With Master hand to strike the

thrilling Lyre." Lady Caroline to Lord Byron [11 March?] 1812, Bodleian, Dep. Lovelace Byron 155, f. 74.

20. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 43.

21. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 13 and 12. Lamb has written the first two verses on page 13 and the third on the opposite page.

22. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 21.

23. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 31.

24. Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 50. From the phrases here quoted one must assume that there were other poems Lady Caroline had committed to memory but not written down.

25. Gift book at Castle Howard, MSS J18/71/1.

26. Bessborough Papers, C1 D4 Folder 161.

27. Lady Caroline Lamb, Poem dated July 1811. On small notepaper. Dated June 1812, however the "2" in "1812" has been pencilled over a "1" in the original, thus, "1811." It is dedicated to "[?] G." The first part has been scribbled over. The poem was almost certainly addressed to "Sir G," i. e., Sir Godfrey Vassal Webster. Bessborough Papers, C1 D4 Folder 161.

28, Lady Caroline Lamb, Poem dated 26 July 1811, on small notepaper, dedicated to "[?]" — the name has been erased and a cross made over the space. Bessborough Papers, C1 D4 Folder 161.

29. Lady Caroline Lamb, Commonplace Book, Murray Archive.

30. Lady Caroline Lamb, Book of Poetry, p. 45.

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