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Charles Lamb's Canny Career Choices

Opening his 1818 *Works* with a dedication to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb ostensibly disclaims some of the responsibility for both the volumes' title and their existence: 'YOU will smile to see the slender labors of your friend designated by the title of *Works*; but such was the wish of the gentlemen who have kindly undertaken the trouble of collecting them, and from their judgment could be no appeal.'¹ In a positioning characteristic of prefatory materials, but also of much of his own literary output, Lamb seeks to appear modest, diffident and attentive to social peculiarities. However, this masks the carefulness with which his 1818 *Works* were positioned, gathering together his past writings at an opportune moment to test his reputation and conduct a critical experiment that might guide his future literary productions. Michael Gamer has called the creative processes behind projects like Lamb's 1818 *Works* 're-collection', contending that 'a re-collection is never merely a new edition of an older book. Rather, it gathers its component parts and presents them in new ways, transforming the assembled contents – through combination and juxtaposition, revision and reordering, repricing and repackaging – so as effectively to produce a new work.'² Gamer's sense of the transformative nature of such re-collections might be brought into play to modify Joseph Riehl's sense that the reception of Lamb's *Works* '[indicates] that Lamb's reputation with critics and the public had been growing' during the 1810s.³ Riehl is correct to an extent – Lamb had certainly benefitted from being boosted by Leigh Hunt in *The Examiner* – but he also confounds cause and effect in his observation. The reappraisal of Lamb in 1818 and 1819 was driven in considerable part by his making a selection of his past writings available as a landmark. 'Mr. Lamb,' William Jerdan wrote in the *Literary Gazette*, 'has long had the reputation, amongst his friends, of being a man of genius; but his productions, excepting only his "John Woodvil," have been so scattered about in magazines and other periodical works, that it was not until lately that the public were enabled easily to form a correct judgement of his merit.'⁴ The 1818 *Works*

¹ Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1818), I, v.

² Michael Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization and the Business of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 2.

³ Joseph E. Riehl, *That Dangerous Figure: Charles Lamb and the Critics* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), p. 10.

⁴ [William Jerdan], 'The Works of Charles Lamb', *Literary Gazette*, 3.134 (16 August 1819), 516-17 (p. 516).

actively sought to solicit such a judgement. By republishing much (although far from all) of his previous work ‘in altered garb’ and ‘with a revised set of claims’ (in Gamer’s terms), the 1818 *Works* let Lamb re-present his various literary productions as a literary career, inviting critics to characterise his output and rate his fluency across different forms.

There has been a tendency in scholarship to stage Lamb rather Romantically as an alienated or oppositional figure out of step with the times in which he lived. Such considerations pick up on William Hazlitt’s assertion that ‘Mr. Lamb has succeeded not by conforming to the *Spirit of the Age*, but in opposition to it.’ Hazlitt’s Lamb is a rather delicate and unworldly character: ‘He is shy, sensitive, the reverse of everything coarse, vulgar, obtrusive, and *common-place*.’⁵ However, in positioning Lamb as forging a unique path without paying much attention to the book trade or contemporary literary culture, Hazlitt and those who follow him protest too much. Lamb was a writer who valued peculiarity, but he was also a privileged, well-informed observer of and participant in the fashions of his age. He was certainly an experimenter, but he was also someone who carefully watched the experiments of others, considering how he might adapt them. Some of his own literary experiments were unsuccessful, but giving due weight to paratexts and correspondence serves to demonstrate that Lamb’s choices about what, where and when to write and publish manifest a keen awareness of the paradigms and opportunities afforded by changing social, cultural and print environments.

Lamb made one of his most important career choices early in his life when he determined that he would secure his primary income from the East India Company. Lacking the kinds of independent incomes many of his friends possessed, he knew that trying to live solely by literary profits was unlikely to be sustainable. While he enjoyed complaining about his employment, he was fairly sure he had made the right choice. In 1823, he expressed horror when he heard that the Quaker poet Bernard Barton was thinking of leaving his bank position and throwing himself into the realm of letters. ‘Throw yourself rather, my dear sir,’ he wrote ‘from the steep Tarpeian Rock, slap-dash headlong upon iron spikes.’ He attempted vehemently to dissuade Barton from his proposed course:

⁵ William Hazlitt, ‘Elia—Geoffrey Crayon’, in *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), pp. 409-24 (pp. 410-11, 411).

If you had but five consolatory minutes between the desk and the bed, make much of them, and live a century in them, rather than turn slave to the Booksellers. They are Turks and Tartars, when they have poor Authors at their beck. Hitherto you have been at arm's length from them. Come not within their grasp. I have known many authors for bread, some repining, others envying the blessed security of a Counting House, all agreeing they had rather have been Taylors, Weavers, what not? rather than the things they were. I have known some starved, some to go mad, one dear friend literally dying in a workhouse. You know not what a rapacious, dishonest set those booksellers are. Ask even Southey, who (a single case almost) has made a fortune by book drudgery, what he has found them.⁶

Lamb was correct to warn Barton of the perils of authorship. As I have discussed in detail in *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, very few literary authors made significant direct profits from their writing, and seeking to do so was fraught with risk.⁷ David Williams, who founded a charitable Literary Fund to address the plights of struggling authors, opined accurately that those who believed that they could live comfortably by the pen were generally 'soon and miserably undeceived.'⁸ Southey, who Lamb picks as his example, had a significant guaranteed income from a state pension that had replaced the substantial annuity he had started receiving at the age of twenty-one from his friend Charles Wynn. The security granted by these supports let him build a reputation and negotiate a series of preferential arrangements with publishers. These circumstances, as Lamb certainly knew, could not easily be replicated. The more common situation was that described by Isaac D'Israeli in his 1812 miscellany *Calamities of Authors*:

The studies of a true Author insulate him in society, exacting daily labours; yet he will receive but little encouragement, and less remuneration. It will be found that the most successful Author can obtain no equivalent for the labours of his life [...] Most

⁶ Lamb to Bernard Barton, 9 January 1823, Letter 280 in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by E.V. Lucas, 2 vols (London: Methuen and Co., 1905), II, 594-5 (p. 594)

⁷ Matthew Sangster, *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period* (Cham: Palgrave, 2021). The rest of this paragraph evokes writers discussed in more detail in that book's introduction.

⁸ David Williams, *Claims of Literature: The Origin, Motives, Objects, and Transactions, of the Society for the Establishment of a Literary Fund* (London: William Miller, 1802), p. 62.

Authors close their lives in apathy or despair, and too many live by means which few of them would not blush to describe.⁹

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge argued that aspirant authors should ‘Let literature be an honourable *augmentation* to your arms; but not constitute the coat, or fill the escutcheon!’¹⁰ While it is debateable whether Coleridge took his own advice seriously, it is clear that Lamb did.

Knowing that expected returns from publishers were in most cases very limited makes it easier to understand why Lamb, despite his obvious affinity for literary matters, declined to make authorship his profession. He was well known for moaning about the restrictions that his employment at East India House put on his time, but in writing to Barton, he described this grouching as being to a great extent performative.

Henceforth I retract all my fond complaints of mercantile employment, look upon them as Lovers’ quarrels. I was but half in earnest. Welcome, dead timber of a desk, that makes me live. A little grumbling is a wholesome medicine for the spleen; but in my inner heart do I approve and embrace this our close but unharassing way of life.¹¹

This letter to Barton provides a useful corrective to the view that Lamb was a frustrated author trapped in a job that he hated. There were, of course, pragmatic reasons why Lamb required a steady income once he was taking care of Mary, but he was also clear-eyed about the difficulties of seeking to support oneself as a writer and correct to see his own course of employment as more stable and profitable. His starting wage at the South Sea Company in 1791 was only half a guinea a week and his first year’s salary at the East India Company in 1795 was £40; however, his salary increased to £70 in 1796, to £90 by 1799, and by £10 a year thereafter. Lamb also received an annual gratuity of £30 from 1800, which ‘rose steadily’. E.V. Lucas reckons that Lamb’s yearly income reached a pretty comfortable £200 around 1805, when he was about thirty; a reorganisation of the company in 1815 caused his basic salary to double from £240 to £480, and by 1821 it had reached £700. From the mid-

⁹ Isaac D’Israeli, *Calamities of Authors; including some Inquiries Respecting their Moral and Literary Characters*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1812), I, viii-ix.

¹⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), I, 231.

¹¹ Lamb to Barton, p. 595.

1810s, Lamb was a prosperous man, whose income probably matched or outpaced Southey's from that point forward.¹²

While Lamb did not make writing a major means of financial support, he nevertheless saw authorship as a valuable activity from which he could derive both tangible and intangible personal benefits. It is clear from his letters, co-publishing practices and the content of his works that Lamb, like many authors of his age, valued writing for the sociable connections it created. By inclination and self-fashioning, Lamb was particularly suited to a small-circle paradigm, developing his facility for brief works, animating puns, sentimental connectivity and essayistic conceits and ironies. Earlier in his literary career, he may have considered the prospect of leveraging connections and a poetic reputation into the kind of patronage incomes that supported some of his friends. It is possible that he had hopes of Charles Lloyd, whose wealthy family could potentially have underwritten Lamb as the Wedgwoods did Coleridge; Lloyd, after all, had paid Coleridge a pretty substantial yearly sum (£80) for instruction. However, Lamb's surviving letters give no indication that he thought of Lloyd as a potential patron rather than a friend and collaborator. In reading the early Lamb, I would concur with Felicity James's view that the register of friendship is crucial.¹³ Knowing the social and financial difficulty of being 'all-author', Lamb instead pursued authorship as a willing part of a coterie group: a mode that fitted within the 'consolatory minutes' available to him around his work at the India House and that was well-suited to a relatively small and tightly networked literary scene. Jeffrey Cox and Tim Fulford have both written valuable accounts of the effectiveness of coterie formations in this period, in which building networks of support was crucial for sustaining a productive literary career.¹⁴ This is true in strictly mercenary terms: the public support of private friends could directly influence works' wider receptions, as Southey hoped when he wrote in an 1808 letter, 'Puff me, Coleridge! if you

¹² Figures from E.V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1905), I, 73, 76, 177, 261, 363. For Southey's income, see *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, pp. 122-38.

¹³ Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁴ Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Tim Fulford, *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coterie: The Dialect of the Tribe* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

love me, puff me! Puff a couple of hundreds into my pocket!’¹⁵ However, coterie formations were also important for sustaining writers by reassuring them that they were valued both as authors and as people.

Lamb explicitly acknowledged the importance of the coterie mode in his own development as a writer in his 1818 *Works*’ dedication to Coleridge:

It would be a kind of disloyalty to offer to any one but yourself a volume containing the *early pieces*, which were first published among your poems, and were fairly derivatives from you and them. My friend Lloyd and myself came into our first battle (authorship is a sort of warfare) under cover of the greater Ajax. How this association, which shall always be a dear and proud recollection to me, came to be broken,—who snapped the three-fold cord,—whether yourself (but I know that was not the case) grew ashamed of your former companions,—or whether (which is by much the more probable) some ungracious bookseller was author of the separation,—I cannot tell;—but wanting the support of your friendly elm, (I speak for myself,) my vine has, since that time, put forth few or no fruits; the sap (if ever it had any) has become, in a manner, dried up and extinct; and you will find your old associate, in his second volume, dwindled into prose and *criticism*.¹⁶

Lamb thus stages both his 1790s effusions and his 1818 *Works* as being intimately indebted to his close associations, writing that Coleridge ‘first kindled in me, if not the power, yet the love of poetry, and beauty, and kindness’ and showing through the dedication and the inclusion of his early poems that this influence lingers. While he disclaims a direct comparison with Coleridge, he revises this disassociation later in his dedication, implicitly comparing his journalism and essay-writing with Coleridge’s own move into lecturing and prose reflection: ‘You yourself write no *Christabels*, nor *Ancient Mariners*, now.’¹⁷ While it is true that Coleridge was not writing *Christabels* in the 1810s, he had finally published the poem in 1816 as part of a wave of volumes – *Sibylline Leaves*, *Biographia Literaria*, *The*

¹⁵ Robert Southey to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 12 February 1808, Letter 1427 in the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey: A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, gen. eds. Lynda Pratt, Tim Fulford and Ian Packer, Romantic Circles, 2009-, <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/southey_letters/Part_Three/HTML/letterEEEd.26.1427.html>.

¹⁶ Lamb, *Works*, I, v-vi.

¹⁷ Lamb, *Works*, I, vii.

Statesman's Manual, *A Lay Sermon*, the *Zapolya* volume, the revised 1818 version of *The Friend* – that refashioned his reputation as the genius of the 1790s to catalyse post-Waterloo print success. It seems likely that Coleridge and Wordsworth's reshaping of their earlier materials in the late 1810s – and the increased prominence that resulted – was one of Lamb's inspirations in gathering his own works.

In the charged atmosphere of the 1790s, Lamb's coterie voice did not transmit well beyond his immediate circle. Lamb was famously parodied in the conservative *Anti-Jacobin* as an adherent of the new morality, but even the politically accommodating *Analytical Review* described *Blank Verse* as 'whining monotonous melancholy'.¹⁸ The *Critical Review* took a more positive line: although it argued, like many of Lamb's appreciators, that his works were not likely to 'become popular', it contended that the poems in *Blank Verse* 'will become dear to such as have felt the evils of life and known the consolations of Christianity'.¹⁹ While Lamb's 1790s works were only modestly successful, the wistful, confessional strand of his creativity they manifested was valuably woven into the 1818 *Works* and later into the Elia voice. His performances from the 1790s thus helped catalyse more positive considerations of his qualities in the later 1810s. While John Wilson, reviewing the 1818 *Works* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, presumes to base some of his judgements on personal knowledge, he was perhaps also responding to the dedication and to resonances in the verse when he wrote that 'We know that no man is more beloved by his friends than Charles Lamb; and it is impossible to read a page of his poetry without feeling he deserves all their love.'²⁰

In the 1800s, Lamb made several attempts at a form of literary writing that could potentially garner large profits: composing a successful play for one of the London theatres. This was something Wordsworth tried unsuccessfully with *The Borderers* and that Coleridge tried with delayed success when he wrote *Osorio* in 1797. When revised as *Remorse* and performed at Drury Lane in 1813 with a prologue by Lamb, this drama became Coleridge's most profitable production. Lamb, of course, loved the theatre, so it is unsurprising that

¹⁸ 'XXV. *Blank Verse*', *Analytical Review*, 27.5 (May 1798), 522-3 (p. 522).

¹⁹ 'Blank Verse', *Critical Review*, 24 (October 1798), 232-4 (p. 232).

²⁰ [John Wilson], 'Works of Charles Lamb', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 3.17 (August 1818), 599-610, (p. 600).

playwriting was something he would attempt. His tragedy *John Woodvil* failed to make it to the stage, rejected by John Philip Kemble. Lamb nevertheless sought to place it before the public, publishing the play at his own expense and losing £25 by the speculation.²¹ He acknowledges *John Woodvil*'s poor reception in his dedication to Coleridge, in which he writes that his friend believed the play presented 'a certain over-imitation of the antique in the style'.²² Coleridge may have said this in private, but the *Edinburgh Review* had said as much and more in public in a bitingly satirical article that affected to hold the play up for praise due to its 'pristine rudeness'.²³ This was a period in which Lamb's coterie associations with the Lake School meant that it was difficult for him to get a fair hearing from many reviewers; the accumulation and re-collection of his writings in the 1818 *Works* was in part a means for having them reconsidered in a more clement cultural climate.

Lamb initially seemed to have better luck with his farce *Mr. H*, which was accepted for production at Drury Lane. He was keenly aware that if his play succeeded, it could have a transformative effect on his prospects. In the run-up to the farce's first performance, he wrote to Thomas Manning that 'I shall get £200 from the theatre if Mr. H has a good run & I hope £100 for the copyright. Nothing, if it fails; & there never was a more ticklish thing. The whole depends on the manner in which the name is brought out, which I value myself on, as a Chef d'ouvre.'²⁴ Lamb's assessment of the potential of a successful play was accurate, but unfortunately for him, theatre audiences could be harsh judges, even when carefully managed. Reporting on the first night to Wordsworth, Lamb makes clear that while the performance started well, things went rapidly downhill:

Mr. H.— came out last night, & failed. I had many fears; the subject was not substantial enough. John Bull must have solider fare than a *Letter*. We are pretty stout about it, have had plenty of condoling friends; but, after all, we had rather it should have succeeded. You will see the Prologue in most of the Morning Papers. It was received with such shouts as I never witness'd to a Prologue. It was attempted to

²¹ Lucas, *Life*, I, 225.

²² Lamb, *Works*, I, viii.

²³ [T. Brown], 'Lamb's *John Woodvil*', *Edinburgh Review*, 1.3 (April 1803), 90-96 (p. 95).

²⁴ Charles Lamb to Thomas Manning, 5 December 1806, Letter 208 in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. by Edwin W. Marris, 3 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975-8), II, 244-8 (p. 247).

be **encored**. How hard! a thing I did merely as a task, because it was wanted—— and set no great store by; and Mr. H.——! !——

The quantity of friends we had in the house my brother & I being in Public Offices &c. was astonishing—but they yielded at last to a few hissers — —. A hundred hisses——damn the word, I write it like **kisses**—how different—a hundred hisses outweigh a 1000 **Claps**. The former come more directly from the Heart.— Well, tis withdrawn & there is an end.²⁵

At the performance of *Mr. H*, Lamb's friends in the audience proved insufficient to boost the play to the third author's night by which Lamb might directly have profited. However, while it is clear from the letter that Lamb was downcast about his farce's fate, there is also a sense that some of the edge was taken off by the actions of his friends. Even the duty of writing to Wordsworth becomes a chance to try for a more successful kind of performance in the assonance of hisses and kisses and the careful weightings of the final paragraph. Lamb's talent for drama had not been proven, but his talent for sociable connection let him keep his literary muscles limber, and his secure work at the East India House meant that while the failure stung, it was not ruinous for him in a way that it would have been for someone who had banked on a theatrical pay-out to keep their career on track.²⁶

After failing to establish a strong reputation as a poet or a dramatist, Lamb turned to forms that were seen at the time as being more modest to supplement his income from his work at the East India House. In the later 1800s he produced collaborative writings for children in works like *Tales from Shakespear* and *Mrs Leicester's School* and also worked hard in the British Museum Reading Room on compiling *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets Who Lived About the Time of Shakespeare*, which he hoped would yield 'employment & money in the end'.²⁷ However, these were not works that Lamb chose to include in the 1818 *Works*, perhaps an indication of their peripheral role in his self-conscious self-fashioning as an author. What the 1818 *Works* did include was writing that Lamb did for

²⁵ Charles Lamb to William Wordsworth, 11 December 1806, Letter 209 in *Letters*, ed. Marris, II, 250-1 (pp. 250-1).

²⁶ For an example of a more painful theatrical failure, see my discussion of Robert Heron in *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, pp. 194-204.

²⁷ Charles Lamb to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Clarkson, Letter 213 in *Letters*, ed. Marris, II, 257-8 (p. 258).

periodicals, often anonymously or pseudonymously – satirical letters and essays, pieces of serious criticism and reflections on life. These shorter pieces fitted well with the rhythm of his life and helped him build and maintain networks, but they were also conventionally considered to be less well suited to the project of securing literary fame. When he tells Coleridge that his second volume ‘[dwindles] into prose and *criticism*’, Lamb expresses an anxiety about transitoriness that the project of anthologisation acknowledges, but also seeks to forestall. By collecting and presenting his periodical essays as part of a body of work, Lamb asks his readers whether they might be worthy of more serious and enduring interest.

The 1818 *Works* thus collected a fairly slim gallimaufry of productions, but one that evoked a sense of pleasant familiarity in many readers. As the *Gentleman’s Magazine* put it, ‘We counted on having some good feelings and agreeable recollections awakened; and we were not disappointed’.²⁸ In 1818, Lamb’s writings could be staged in less vexed and controversial circumstances than those in which many of them had first appeared, and with a network of admirers willing and able to go to bat on their behalf. Leigh Hunt, who had helped get Lamb’s *Works* printed, wrote a generous two-part review in *The Examiner* that presented Lamb as an admirably moral and insightful individual:

If we were to make a summary of Mr Lamb’s merits as a writer, we should say that there was not a deeper or more charitable observer existing. [...] He sees through all the causes or circumstances that modify the human character; and while he likes from sympathy, he dislikes with generosity and sincerity, and differs rather than pretends to be better.²⁹

A rather more surprising appreciator was John Wilson, who wrote a long and largely positive review in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, which was at war with Hunt and his circle at the time. Lamb, though, had positioned his works in such a way that Wilson was able to disassociate them from Hunt and Hazlitt in a similar manner to that which *Blackwood’s* would later employ with Shelley.³⁰ In Wilson’s review, Lamb is staged as a unique curiosity

²⁸ ‘The Works of Charles Lamb’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 89 (July 1819), 48-51 (p. 49).

²⁹ [Leigh Hunt], ‘The Works of Charles Lamb’ Part 2, *The Examiner*, 587 (28 March 1819), 204-6 (p. 206).

³⁰ Sangster, *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*, pp. 88-90.

of a kind *Blackwood's* was seeking to activate against the juridical considerations of the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*:

Mr Lamb is without doubt a man of genius, and of very peculiar genius too; so that we scarcely know of any class of literature to which it could with propriety be said that he belongs. His mind is original even in its errors; and though his ideas often flow on in a somewhat fantastic course, and are shaded with no less fantastic imagery, yet at all times they bubble freshly from the fountain of his own mind, and almost always lead to truth. It is pleasant to know and to feel that we have to do with a man of originality.³¹

Reconfirming the opinion of the *Critical's* reviewer for *Blank Verse*, Wilson asserted that Lamb 'never has been, and we are afraid never will be, a very popular writer.' For Wilson, what he called Lamb's faults were 'likely to be very offensive to ordinary readers; while his merits are of so peculiar a kind, that it requires a peculiar taste to feel them justly.'³² Peculiarity is a key term in Wilson's review, but for him, Lamb's peculiarity is his own, rather than of a piece with his 1790s associates:

there can be no greater folly than to talk of him as being one of the Lake School of Poets [...] he bears no resemblance to Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Wilson, in those peculiar talents, peculiar theories, and peculiar poetical habits of life, in which all these poets agree, and which have given their compositions a character so easily distinguishable from all the other poetry of the age.³³

While Wilson is determined to make himself a Laker, he is keen to claim that Lamb is something else, a different kind of observer who might not always see truly, but who certainly sees interestingly. He spends a particularly long time interrogating Lamb's views on staging Shakespeare, demonstrating that while he does not wholly agree with Lamb's position, the essay has spoken to him, its prose voice drawing him effectively into conversation.

³¹ [Wilson], 'Works', p. 599.

³² [Wilson], 'Works', p. 599.

³³ [Wilson], 'Works', p. 601.

The reviews of Lamb's *Works* represented the first time Lamb's voicings were appraised relatively sympathetically by a wide range of print auditors. This process both validated his career and, I would contend, changed its course. Writing on Felicia Hemans' response to critics in the late 1810s, Stephen Behrendt argues that she listened carefully to her reviewers, and 'in reformulating her works to perform ever more effectively a particular aesthetic and emotive function for her readers she likewise reformulated herself.'³⁴ I would argue that Lamb took similar advantage of the responses to his 1818 *Works*, and that the emergence of *Elia* was partly a consequence of his careful listening. He took from reviews like Hunt's and Wilson's a confidence that his works could be framed as valuable and original, and he took from other responses a sense of where his strengths as a writer lay. Concluding a rather mixed review, the *British Critic* wrote that 'We should be sorry to part in ill-temper with Mr. Lamb, for whose character and abilities, when properly directed, we entertain an unfeigned respect. But his poems and plays, we think, are decidedly bad'.³⁵ While other reviewers were somewhat kinder to Lamb's verse and drama, it was his prose writing that attracted the highest praise. In the same review, the *British Critic* described his essays as being 'in a very superior strain to that of his poetry; so much so, indeed, that we felt some surprize, not that a man capable of writing such good sense in prose, should not prove an abler inditer of verses, but that he should so far mistake his talent as to attempt to write verse at all'.³⁶ Wilson opined that 'much the best part of Mr Lamb's book is his serious Essays'.³⁷ *The Literary Panorama* wrote that 'we consider the Essays as by far the best pieces'.³⁸ In his belated review in the *Literary Gazette*, Jerdan felt that he had little to add regarding Lamb's 'celebrated essays': 'So much has been said of these [...] in the daily papers, that we forbear to repeat what has been so well expressed before.'³⁹ The *Literary Journal* excerpted 'On the Inconveniences that result from being Hanged' in full, and its account of Lamb's qualities seems to describe the author of 'Recollections of Christ's Hospital' and 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare' better than the author of *John Woodvil* or

³⁴ Stephen C. Behrendt, "'Certainly not a Female Pen': Felicia Hemans's Early Public Reception', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 95-114 (p. 109).

³⁵ 'Lamb's Works', *The British Critic*, 11 (February 1819), 139-47 (p. 144).

³⁶ *British Critic*, pp. 146-7.

³⁷ [Wilson], 'Works', p. 604.

³⁸ 'The Works of Charles Lamb', *Literary Panorama*, 8.52 (January 1819), columns 1646-53 (column 1651).

³⁹ [Jerdan], 'Works', p. 516.

Blank Verse: ‘Life, manners, and morals, and questions of taste in literature and the arts, are the objects upon which Mr. Lamb employs his mind, and to the contemplation of which he brings those stores of wit, humour, feeling, and discernment, which characterize the genius and critic’.⁴⁰ Reviews like this gave Lamb a pretty clear steer, and the launch of the *London Magazine* represented an ideal opportunity to test a refined version of his essayistic voice, perhaps somewhat inspired by the playful impersonations that John Wilson and his compatriots were employing in *Blackwood’s*, but which also merged the intimacy of his early verse with the self-conscious stagecraft of his dramas and the prose fluency the reviewers of his *Works* seemed almost universally to admire.

Lamb’s great success with the Elia essays was thus catalysed by changing publication environments, by long practice and by Lamb’s particular networks and talents. At the dawn of the 1820s, a space opened up where he could take advantage of the kinds of voicings he had been practicing in the various short forms he had assayed over the past twenty-five years, blending his strange erudition with his playful social manner and his talent for layered irony. *The London Magazine* provided him with a platform to stage iterations of his coterie-forged manner to a wide audience, finally making his name through the stratagem of taking on someone else’s. Some accounts have implied that this was a strategy of self-conscious diminishment; Simon Hull, for example, writes that Lamb ‘embraces instead of resists the marginalising condition of writing for periodicals’.⁴¹ However, such assertions undersell the centrality of magazines to literary culture in this period. Lamb’s accounts in his letters imply that while the essays may at times suggest that he sought to locate himself on the margins, the reality was quite the reverse. Writing to Dorothy Wordsworth early in 1821, he celebrated the ways in which the Elia essays drew admiration:

I am glad you liked my new year’s speculations. Everybody likes them, except the Author of the Pleasures of Hope. Disappointment attend him! How I like to be liked, and *what I do* to be liked! They flatter me in magazines, newspapers, and all the minor reviews. The Quarterlies hold aloof. But they must come into it in time, or their leaves be waste paper.⁴²

⁴⁰ ‘The Works of Charles Lamb’, *Literary Journal*, 1.15 (July 1818), 223-5 (p. 223).

⁴¹ Simon P. Hull, *Charles Lamb, Elia and the London Magazine: Metropolitan Muse* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), p. 7.

⁴² Charles Lamb to Dorothy Wordsworth, 8 January 1821, Letter 249 in *Letters*, ed. Lucas, II, 546-7 (p. 546).

He also clearly enjoyed the ways in which writing for the *London* located him within a network of writers he admired. Writing to John Taylor after Taylor and Hessey's takeover, he informed him that 'The Lond. Mag. is chiefly pleasant to me, because some of my friends write in it', adding that 'I hope Hazlitt intends to go on with it, we cannot spare Table Talk.'⁴³ Conversely, when the contributors he was proud to associate with began to leave the magazine, he carried on out of loyalty, but bemoaned the break-up of a mutually reinforcing group:

You have gratifyd me with liking my meeting with Dodd. For the Malvolio story—the thing is become in verity a sad task and I eke it out with any thing. If I could slip out of it I sh^d be happy, but our chief reputed assistants have forsaken us. The opium eater crossed us once with a dazzling path, and hath as suddenly left us darkling; and in short I shall go on from dull to worse, because I cannot resist the Bookseller's importunity—the old plea you know of authors, but I believe on my part sincere.⁴⁴

It is clear from the use of 'we', 'our' and 'us' in these letters that Lamb identified quite closely with the *London*, in which he was finally the brightest star, but also part of a supportive constellation of the kind he had sought out from the earliest stages of his literary life.

Elia is sometimes read rather straightforwardly as Lamb, but the play with persona is often an opportunity for Lamb to say or be things he could not quite manage under his own name. One way of reading one of the first Elia essays, 'Oxford in the Vacation', would be to see it as a space where Lamb thinks through alternative lives that he might have led. At the beginning of the essay, this can be seen in his seeking to 'play the gentleman, enact the student', but in its later stages, the essay turns on a contrast between Lamb and one of his friends, D.: George Dyer. In the 1823 *Elia* volume, this passage is a rather benign pen-portrait, but this is because Lamb excised two sharper-edged paragraphs that appeared in the *London Magazine* version. In the second of these, we can see Lamb appraising the career of

⁴³ Charles Lamb to John Taylor, 21 July 1821, Letter 262 in *Letters*, ed. Lucas, II, 557.

⁴⁴ Charles Lamb to William Wordsworth, 20 March 1822, Letter 267 in *Letters*, ed. Lucas, II, 562-4 (p. 264).

author and implicitly rejecting it for himself in favour of a more Coleridgean vision of writing as an augmentation to arms:

D. has been under-working for himself ever since;—drudging at low rates for unappreciating booksellers,—wasting his fine erudition in silent corrections of the classics, and in those unostentatious but solid services to learning which commonly fall to the lot of laborious scholars, who have not the heart to sell themselves to the best advantage. He has published poems, which do not sell, because their character is inobtrusive like his own,—and because he has been too much absorbed in ancient literature to know what the popular mark in poetry is, even if he could have hit it. And, therefore, his verses are properly, what he terms them, *crotchets*; voluntaries; odes to Liberty, and Spring; effusions; little tributes, and offerings, left behind him upon tables and window-seats at parting from friends' houses; and from all the inns of hospitality, where he has been courteously (or but tolerably) received in his pilgrimage. If his muse of kindness halt a little behind the strong lines, in fashion in this excitement-craving age, his prose is the best of the sort in the world, and exhibits a faithful transcript of his own healthy, natural mind, and cheerful, innocent tone of conversation.⁴⁵

We return here to the question of character: something that in Lamb's view both Dyer's temperament and his working conditions have prevented him from establishing in the consciousnesses of audiences. By contrast, in *Elia*, Lamb had finally found a way to make his own character obtrusive: an opportunity granted by the social connections his relative comfort had allowed him to foster. Dyer, in constant service to the booksellers, never found the space to stage a kind of social self that would sustain. Supported by his Company salary and pension, Lamb lived in a relatively gentlemanly fashion, died with a small fortune saved and became – as the paradigms of literary judgement slowly morphed – one of the most beloved authors of the Victorian Age. Dyer, however, applied repeatedly to the Literary Fund for charitable support, as did Honor Dyer after his death. His 'cheerful, innocent tone of conversation', always quiet, faded quickly from the literary landscape.

Lamb genuinely liked Dyer, but Dyer also represented for him the road he had rightly chosen not to take. Writing to Bernard Barton in 1824 expressing concerns about the

⁴⁵ *Elia* [Charles Lamb], 'Oxford in the Vacation', *London Magazine*, 2.10 (October 1820), 365-9 (p. 368).

direction of the *London*, Lamb uses Dyer as an exemplum for a kind of sunk-cost fallacy he hopes its publishers will avoid:

Taylor and Hessey finding their magazine goes off very heavily at 2s. 6d. are prudently going to raise their price another shilling; and having already more authors than they want, intend to increase the number of them. If they set up against the New Monthly, they must change their present hands. It is not tying the dead carcass of a Review to a half-dead Magazine will do their business. It is like G. D. multiplying his volumes to make 'em sell better. When he finds one will not go off, he publishes two; two stick, he tries three; three hang fire, he is confident that four will have a better chance.⁴⁶

In light of this, one way of reading Lamb's career would be to see him as refusing to multiply his volumes, but rather experimenting with different forms and alignments. This was a pragmatic choice, bearing in mind his demanding job and the relatively brief time he had for his writing for much of his working life. However, it was also a choice that reflected his ambitions for his writing, his desire to experiment and his sensitivity to changing environments. It took Lamb a while to align his sensibilities with cultural spaces, networks and forms within which they could succeed. However, his choices to seek his income elsewhere, to carefully build networks, and to collect his various experiments and present them to the public for reconsideration all demonstrate forms of pragmatism, determination and present-minded print-cultural creativity that reading Lamb straightforwardly as being Elia might cause us to overlook.

⁴⁶ Charles Lamb to Bernard Barton, [1 December 1824], Letter 341 in *Letters*, ed. Lucas, II, 662-4 (p. 663).