

## Mary Lamb (1764–1847)

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'My new mamma taught me to read. I was a sad little dunce, and scarcely knew my letters; my own mamma has often said when she got better she would hear me read every day, but as she never got better it was not her fault [...] I never went to school till I came here.'

Mrs Leicester's School: or, The History of Several Young Ladies, related by themselves, (1809) pp.92-93.

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by Gillian Dow

Long overshadowed by her celebrated brother, Charles, (who achieved lasting fame as the author of the 'Essays of Elia' in the *London Magazine* between 1820 and 1825) Mary Lamb is now recognised as much more than his literary helpmeet: she was responsible for two-thirds of the Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, still one of the most popular adaptations of Shakespeare's stories for children. The *Tales* has never been out of print since first published in 1807, but it was not until the seventh edition that Mary Lamb's name appeared alongside her brother's. In their own time, the Lambs were at the centre of literary London, although, as Duncan Wu pointed out in a review of Sarah Burton's 2003 biography *A Double Life: A Biography of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 'Charles and Mary were an eccentric pair and knew it, "We are like tooth ache and his friend gum boil". Wu goes on to claim that 'happy, well-balanced people tend not to be great writers, and the Lambs are two of the best of their kind'.

'Happy and well-balanced' Mary Lamb was not. One biographical fact dominates all accounts of her life, and its dramatic nature makes this inevitable. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1796, aged 31, Mary Lamb stabbed her mother to death with a kitchen knife. From that point on, her mental health was unstable, and she lived under her brother's care. Nine years her junior, Charles felt all the weight of this responsibility for his sister, and biographers and critics alike have used Mary's ill-health to explain Charles's own periods of mental illness, and as the reason he never married.

Despite suffering throughout her life from what now seems to have been manic depression, Mary Lamb had lengthy periods of remission, in which she was able to advance her literary endeavours. Her preoccupation throughout her work seems to have

been on the education of young people, and girls in particular. The preface to the *Tales from Shakespeare*, composed almost entirely by Mary, tells the reader 'For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book'.

Mary Lamb's interest in female education is represented in this exhibition by *Mrs Leicester's School*, first printed in 1809 for William Godwin's Juvenile Library. Of the ten stories, Charles contributed three. The framework is not unlike Sarah Fielding's earlier *The Governess*, in that the ten stories are the 'histories' of the lives of ten girls prior to their arrival at Mrs Leicester's School. They contain strongly autobiographical elements, the variety of motherless and orphaned girls perhaps serving as a way for Mary to work through her guilt and grief.

Mary Lamb published little after *Poetry for Children*, another joint publication with her brother, which appeared like *Mrs Leicester's School* in 1809. Her essay 'On Needlework' in the *British Ladies' Magazine* (1815) was her last publication. In it, she addresses the topic of female education and women's work and duties more generally. Mary Lamb sees no need for a daughter to be brought up to a 'learned profession', which may cause excessive strain. Rather, the time spent doing needlework in leisure hours could be put to good use by selling the products of this leisure, thus contributing to the household income.