

Charles Lamb, James White, Shakespeare's Papers, and John Warburton's Cook

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1. Lamb and *Falstaff's Letters*

James White (1775-1820) is chiefly remembered today as the friend Charles Lamb describes in his celebrated "Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" essay, with its moving epitaph: "He [White] carried away with him half the fun of the world when he died—of my world at least" (*Works* 2: 114). He has his own claim to interest, however. In 1796 White published *Original Letters, &c. of Sir John Falstaff and His Friends [...] From Genuine Manuscripts* (a work which quickly became known for convenience as *Falstaff's Letters*, the title used here). The volume, a clever pastiche of Shakespearean comedy, gently satirized William Henry Ireland's recent "discovery" (that is, forgery) of Shakespearean manuscripts, and the public credulity connected with that event. It consists of a series of purportedly contemporary papers, written by the protagonists, illustrating and amplifying the Gloucestershire scenes in 2 *Henry IV*, the entire action of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and concluding with the deaths of Slender (not in Shakespeare) and of Falstaff himself (otherwise detailed in *Henry V*). The humor of *Falstaff's Letters*, though rich, is rather dense, and it was not an immediate success. Lamb was soon informing Coleridge that "Poor fellow [White], he has (very undeservedly) lost by it [*Falstaff's Letters*]; nor do I see that it is likely ever to reimburse

him the charge of printing, etc.” (*Letters* 1: 57). Lamb was a tireless champion of the book, which was also spoken of affectionately by Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt. Nevertheless, no new edition was called for in its author’s lifetime,¹ and White’s interests soon drifted away from literature. From 1800 he concentrated his formidable energies on advertising, becoming one of London’s first advertising men.²

The fortunes of *Falstaff’s Letters* changed drastically in 1874 when William Carew Hazlitt showed that Lamb himself may have had a hand in the book. He presented both external and internal evidence. The former consisted of a letter from John Matthew Gutch, an old friend of White and Lamb, written to Philip Bliss in 1852, which quoted some notes Gutch himself had earlier made in his copy of *Falstaff’s Letters*, including the statement: “These Letters were the production of my old schoolfellow James White, with incidental hints and corrections by another schoolfellow, Charles Lamb” (156). The latter was a passage in the “Preface” which seemed, to William Carew Hazlitt, strikingly suggestive of Lamb’s mature prose. The passage explained that the papers had once been in the possession of “Mrs. Quickly, Landlady of the Boar Tavern in Eastcheap” (Shakespeare’s character), and after her death had passed to

... an elderly maiden sister; who, unfortunately for all the world, and to my individual eternal sorrow and regret, of all the dishes in the culinary system, was fond of roast pig.

A curse on her Epicurean guts, that could not be contented with plain mutton, like the rest of her Ancestors!

Reader, whenever as journeying onward in thy epistolary progress, a chasm should occur to interrupt the chain of events, I beseech thee blame not me, but curse the rump of roast pig. This maiden-sister,

conceive with what pathos I relate it, absolutely made use of several, no doubt invaluable letters, to shade the jutting protuberances of that animal from disproportionate excoriation in its circuitous approaches to the fire. (White, ed. Merrill xxxvi-xxxvii)

Hazlitt remarked:

On the fly-leaf of Mr. Gutch's copy, now before me, somebody enquires: "Is not the germ of Elia's inimitable production upon Roast Pig to be found at p.xii. of the Preface [the passage quoted above]?" It really seems not unlikely that such was the case. Who knows but that Lamb was part author of that same Preface? An interesting problem, indeed, when we reflect that, of all Eliana, this "Disquisition upon Roast Pig" is very nearly the most familiar and dear to us all [...]! (157)

("Elia" was the pseudonym Lamb started using in 1820.) "[S]uch as entertain a curiosity regarding the *prima stamina* of great men's more famous works," Hazlitt suggested, "may consult at their leisure the passage indicated, and judge for themselves" (157). Many scholarly "Elians" accepted the invitation, and even when they failed to find the "germ" of the "Dissertation upon Roast Pig" they unanimously agreed that the passage sounds like Lamb.

Lamb's popularity was, at this time, ascending to extraordinary heights: he was regularly acclaimed one of the greatest, as well as the most loveable of writers in the English pantheon. In 1868 George Augustus Sala remarked "the amazing personal popularity which Charles Lamb enjoys wherever English letters are cultivated" (xxxiii). By 1886 Swinburne, a totally different writer, could start an essay: "The most beloved of English writers may be Goldsmith or may be Scott: the best beloved will always be Charles Lamb. His claim and his charm, for those who can feel them at all, are incomparable

with any other man's" (157). In this climate the suggestion that Lamb may have had a hand in *Falstaff's Letters* (which would, in fact, be his earliest surviving prose), inspired an inevitable revival of interest in the work. In 1877 a new edition was published, dedicated to Lamb, "With notices of the Author," the first attempt at a biography of White, added as an introduction. The unknown editor remarked that "It would seem to be the fate of some books to be born into the world out of their due time, and thus to miss the meed of praise and fame to which their merit entitles them, and which under more fortunate auspices they would doubtless have obtained," and offered the work to readers as "no unwise or unacceptable tribute to the memory of Elia" (v, vi). The introduction pointed to another piece of external evidence that Lamb had contributed to the book. On 2 February 1836 Robert Southey had written to Edward Moxon, reminiscing about his first meeting with Lamb in the 1790s. Mentioning White, Southey had stated: "He and Lamb were joint authors of the Original Letters of Falstaff" (Southey 6: 287).

In the late 1800s readers of *Falstaff's Letters* undoubtedly approached the work with considerable will to discover traces of Lamb's authorship. The "roast pig" passage continued to seem his likeliest contribution, but suspicion also fell on the black letter, affectedly antique "Dedicatoyone" to Ireland the forger. In 1903, in his still standard edition of Lamb's works, E. V. Lucas, the dean of Lamb scholars, asserted that "there is strong reason to believe that Lamb had a share in it [*Falstaff's Letters*]" (1: 465). He printed the entire "Dedicatoyone" and quoted the "roast pig" passage with the comment: "Either Lamb wrote that, or to James White's influence we owe some of the most cherished mannerisms of *Elia*" (1: 467). Lucas was steeped in Lamb's work; his feeling for the Elian "mannerism" here remains a valuable observation by a writer exceptionally well qualified to judge. The following year *Falstaff's*

Letters was published in the De La More Press's "King's Classics" series. The editor, Israel Gollancz, summed up the conclusions of three decades by stating:

The Dedication and Preface (more especially the imprecation on the rump of roast pig) are suggestive of the hand of Elia. Most students of Lamb are inclined to assign these passages to his pen. (xii)

Twenty years later there was another new edition, this time introduced by Charles Edmund Merrill junior, who was non-committal on the question of Lamb's contribution. The demand for *Falstaff's Letters* was still largely based on its connection with Lamb, and Merrill's cautiousness reflected no general reassessment of the authorship question. In his *Lamb Before Elia* of 1932 F. V. Morley accepted the accounts of collaboration without demur, and in 1933 Edmund Blunden, a much finer critic, quoted the "roast pig" passage as Lamb's, and as an anticipation of "his prose seniority"—though cautioned his readers not to "stand upon niceties of external proof" (50-51).

The first serious doubt seems to have come, unexpectedly, from Lucas. In his 1935 edition of Lamb's *Letters* he mentioned the evidence supplied by Gutch and Southey, but added: "On the other hand I have seen, in Kentucky, the copy of the book [*Falstaff's Letters*] presented by White to Lamb, with the inscription, 'From the Author'; and surely, if Lamb had been a collaborator, that fact would have been acknowledged" (1: 5). After 1935 little is heard of "the hand of Elia" in *Falstaff's Letters*. But this undoubtedly had less to do with any feeling that the case had weakened than it had with the rather sudden decline of Lamb's reputation. In the decades of "New Criticism" Lamb was made to pay for the high reputation he had enjoyed for nearly a century by being relegated from the English Classics to the division of "minor" Romantics. *Falstaff's Letters*, no longer buoyed up by Elia's association,

silently slipped from the small niche it had come to occupy in the margins of the Romantic canon. Interest in White's book only revived in the 1990s, with fine essays by Reginald Watters and T. W. Craik. Watters quotes the "roast pig" passage as like the mature Lamb "in substance as well as in style ... [T]he preface shows much that he [Lamb] was later to make his own" (268). Craik, too, feels that Lamb must have had a hand in the book. Both critics present a case for the literary quality and interest of *Falstaff's Letters* as a whole, a point rather obscured in the 1870s-1930s period, the heyday of the book's reputation.

Exactly what Lamb contributed to *Falstaff's Letters*, if anything, is likely to remain mysterious. There is no reason to doubt Gutch's statement that he supplied "incidental hints and corrections": Gutch was well placed to know. But even the most sophisticated, computer-assisted stylistic analyses, such as the cusum method developed by Andrew Q. Morton, are unable to sift a text to reveal such fine traces of a second author. Nevertheless, as Lucas suggested in 1903, whether Lamb wrote the "roast pig" passage or not, it is fascinating: either it, and other, comparable passages in *Falstaff's Letters* are Lamb's earliest anticipation of his mature prose style, or they suggest that James White exerted no inconsiderable influence on the Elian manner—indeed that Lamb imitated White. And Lamb, it must be remembered, was one of the most influential English prose stylists of the entire nineteenth century.

2. Shakespeare in the Oven

The passage in *Falstaff's Letters* concerning Mrs Quickly's "elderly maiden sister" and her appetite for "roast pig" merits critical scrutiny. It is an independent, detachable joke (which helps explain the attribution to Lamb),

and, I argue here, gently mocks the genuine destruction of a large number of dramatic manuscripts collected by the antiquary, John Warburton (1682-1759). Before his death Warburton drew up a list of around fifty manuscript plays he had obtained, by writers such as Shakespeare, Marlowe, Dekker, Chapman, Ford, and Massinger. To this he later added a note:

After I had been many years collecting these MS. plays, through my own carelessness and the ignorance of my servant in whose hands I had lodged them, they were unluckily burn'd, or put under pye-bottoms, excepting the three which follow:

Second Maiden's Tragedy

Bugbears

Queen of Corsica. (Reed 1: 617)³

W. W. Greg, the great bibliographer, described this as "perhaps the most pitiful of all monuments to the vanity of antiquarian endeavour" (225). It remains a probably unmatched destruction of valuable literary manuscripts through sheer carelessness.

Warburton's list and note were first published in George Steevens's 15-volume *Plays of William Shakspeare* [sic] of 1793 (a large scale revision of the earlier Johnson / Steevens variorum edition).⁴ This was, in 1796, the most monumental edition of Shakespeare's work available, and the major source of information on his life and times. As John Freehafer has pointed out, the Warburton story was known in some circles prior to 1793 (160-1). It is clear, for example, that Edmond Malone, the great Shakespeare scholar, knew Warburton's list as early as 1778. Moreover, the 1782 edition of *Biographia Dramatica*, revised by Isaac Reed, frequently refers to the destruction caused by Warburton's servant. Here there appears to be no complete account of the story, however, and no reference to the *means* by

which the manuscripts were destroyed.⁵ It must be concluded that if White or Lamb were responding to the Warburton story they knew it from the 1793 *Shakspeare*, which no doubt made it far more widely known.

The “roast pig” passage in *Falstaff’s Letters* is a striking example of the way that “serious” stories, in Marilyn Butler’s words, “make their way down into the cultural water-table, to spring up oddly in [...] popular locations” (74). 1796 was perhaps too early for the joke to be fully enjoyed, but in making fun of the Warburton incident White (and/or Lamb) was anticipating the future. In the 1800s the story of Warburton’s cook became increasingly well-known as it was transformed into a comic anecdote of British literary history. Scott’s 1822 novel, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, played a seminal role in the process. In an “Introductory Epistle” the “Author of Waverley” (Scott’s popular designation) recounts how he had been visited by the ghost of Warburton’s servant, who confessed to her untimely destruction of the plays before directing him to a coalhole where some surviving “greasy and blackened fragments” had been preserved:

“Yes, stranger, it was these ill-fated hands that consigned to grease and conflagration the scores of small quartos, which, did they now exist, would drive the whole Roxburghe Club out of their sense—it was these unhappy pickers and stealers that singed fat fowls and wiped dirty trenchers with the lost works of Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, Jonson, Webster—What shall I say?—even of Shakespeare himself.” (12)

(The Roxburghe Club was an aristocratic book club, founded in 1812, which printed limited editions of scarce early books.) The humor here is obviously close to that of *Falstaff’s Letters*. By 1822 Warburton’s original list and note had been reprinted several times, but after Scott’s intervention the story tended

to be paraphrased. By 1911 Greg could complain that "The story has been told over and over again with every kind of facetious adornment, till no history of literature is complete without it" (225-6). The most extraordinary aspect of this popularization is that Warburton's originally anonymous servant gained a name: Betsy Baker. One supposes that this must have started as a joke (Scott had called her Betty Barnes), yet by the end of the century fiction had become so confounded with fact that Betsy Baker was even named in W. P. Courtney's *Dictionary of National Biography* article on Warburton with no suggestion that she was anything but a real person. This popularization of the story moved the emphasis away from the details of what was lost to the comic means by which it was lost, a shift that had the effect of creating a tradition for the "roast pig" joke in *Falstaff's Letters*, and which may well have helped focus interest and enjoyment on that passage after 1874. Since 1911 the situation has changed. The Warburton holocaust story has dropped out of popular literary history and again become the preserve of a few specialists interested in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, just as it was in the late 1700s.

Greg's article largely effected this change, turning a popular anecdote (back) into a bibliographical problem. Comparing Warburton's list with plays listed in the Stationers' Register, Greg concluded that Warburton probably never had owned many of the works supposed to have been destroyed, but had "made out a list containing the titles of such pieces as he thought it might be possible to recover, in addition to those of the plays of which he had already become possessed" (259). This threw the door open for skeptics. A few years later C. R. Baskervill went so far as to suggest "a possibility that the borrowed list of plays was accompanied by a borrowed story." He pointed to an obscure volume of seventeenth-century verse, *Naps upon Parnassus* (1658), written

by a group of university students, in which the supposed editor—one Adoniram Banstittle, “alias Tinderbox”—apologized for their being no author’s name on the title page by explaining that he did not know it, having found the poems in an alehouse:

... like the desperate St. George, [I] redeem’d these Ethiopian Virgin-Poems, out of the Jaws of that fell Dragon, (the furious gaping Oven) which, (even when I had first bestridden the threshold) yawn’d for them. Much adoë I had to recover Them out of the good Womans hands, who left the bottoms of her Pies (that baking) in very great jeopardy, for want of them: yet at last I did get them, as many as you see there are of them. (A2v)

The following year Harry Morgan Ayres supported Baskervill, drawing attention to a comparable passage in Henry Bold’s *Latine Songs, with their English: and Poems* (1685). Neither Baskervil nor Ayres speculated on Warburton’s motives for such an odd fraud as they implicitly accuse him of. More recently, John Freehafer has pointed to two other literary anticipations of Warburton’s holocaust, but he argues the opposite, and surely more convincing case, that these simply prove old manuscripts and books were used as scrap paper (159). Freehafer makes a convincing argument for Warburton having really owned the manuscripts he listed, in which case there is obviously no reason to question an account of their destruction that certainly cannot be said to place him in a flattering light. Nevertheless, the existence of possible “sources” for the Warburton story suggests that White (and/or Lamb) may have been indebted to those rather than to the Warburton story itself.

It is a possibility, though not, I think, a likely one. Although Lamb was later to become an avid collector of obscure old books, there is no reason to

suppose that he or White, both poorly paid City clerks, would, in 1796, have known such works as Baskerville and Ayres cite. Of the two further examples Freehafer gives, it seems similarly unlikely that White or Lamb would have known Peter Motteux's forgotten 1707 comedy, *Farewel Folly*, and even if they did, the relevant passage is far more remote from the *Falstaff's Letters* anecdote than the Warburton story. This leaves only a reference in Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* to "neglected Authors" becoming, delightfully, "Martyrs of Pies" (100-101). They may well have known this, but it is hard to imagine it inspiring their comic narrative of manuscript destruction. The preface to *Falstaff's Letters* is very much engaged with the Ireland case and the issues it had opened up. There was no reason to consult Dryden's satire on the literary small fry of his day. Indeed the Dryden passage, like the others located by Baskerville, Ayres and Freehafer, concerns the overlooked merit (or not) of contemporary authors, and has nothing to do with the loss of valuable Shakespeare-related manuscripts. That White (and/or Lamb) was focused on the latter will become clearer when the larger context of Shakespeare studies at this period is considered.

3. Shakespeare Not Himself

Around 1781 the Revd James Wilmot (1726-1808), formerly a fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, retired to the village of Barton-on-the-Heath, a few miles from Stratford-upon-Avon. At the invitation of a London publisher, he decided to research and write a biography of Shakespeare. Wilmot diligently worked his way through private libraries and document collections in the Stratford area, hoping to find new information related to his subject. He found nothing; it was as if Shakespeare had never existed. Initially puzzled by this, around 1785 Wilmot came to the extraordinary conclusion that William

Shakespeare of Stratford had not written the masterpieces of dramatic literature preserved in his name. Instead, he guessed, Sir Francis Bacon had written them and then destroyed the evidence. Wilmot was the first of the group later known as “anti-Stratfordians,” whose numbers since the mid-1800s—when the theory of Bacon’s authorship first appeared in print—have been legion. We will never know how much evidence Wilmot had assembled because shortly before his death he ordered that all his own papers relating to his “discoveries” should be burnt. But it is clear that it was the very absence of Shakespearean documents which allowed Wilmot the imaginative space to work out his daring and ultimately influential theory.⁶

Wilmot’s is an extreme case, but a revealing one. It was in the late 1700s that the British public first became uneasy at the scarcity of Shakespearean relics. In the earlier part of the century this had caused little concern. Jonathan Bate has drawn attention to the striking fact that in the late 1720s, when Lewis Theobald claimed to have discovered a “lost” Shakespeare play, little interest was shown in the manuscript, of which Theobald claimed to have three copies (all have since vanished) (82). Bate explains the extraordinary change between then and the 1790s as the commodification of Shakespeare: “The birth of the Shakespeare industry is paradigmatic of eighteenth-century England as a consumer society” (86). This is doubtless true, though not a full explanation of the phenomenon. The eighteenth century witnessed a growing rage *to know* in many areas of human enquiry, saw increasing agreement about Shakespeare’s supremacy within the English pantheon, and developed the interest in biography that would culminate in the fascinating minutiae of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*. Wilmot’s abortive biography would have built on the skeleton that was Shakespearean biography at this time, and that has not been fleshed out very significantly since. In 1780 the leading Shakespeare

scholar, George Steevens, published a famous note on how little was known, and how unreliable the apocryphal additions were:

As all that is known with any degree of certainty concerning Shakespeare, is—*that he was born at Stratford upon Avon, —married and had children there, —went to London, where he commenced actor, and wrote poems and plays, —returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried,* —I must confess my readiness to combat every unfounded supposition respecting the particular occurrences of his life. (Malone, *Supplement* 1: 654)

In the final decades of the century documents likely to shed light on Shakespeare and his work were looked for with increasing urgency. Steevens published Warburton's list of lost plays in a modest footnote to Malone's standard "Attempt to Ascertain the Order in which the Plays of Shakespeare were Written," originally published in 1778. Malone's work makes it clear why the destruction of manuscript plays like Warburton's seemed significant. It was not because there was any widespread enthusiasm for the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries—that only commenced in the 1800s, partly through the efforts of Lamb—but because those plays might throw "new lights" on Shakespeare's work. Malone urged the "possessors" of such plays to "condescend to examine them with attention" from this point of view (Reed 1: 593). Similarly, in a prospectus for a new edition of Shakespeare that he issued in 1795, the year of Ireland's forgeries, Malone stated his belief "that much Information might be procured, illustrative of that extraordinary Man [Shakespeare], if Persons possessed of ancient Papers would take the trouble to examine them, or permit others to peruse them" (Schoenbaum 140). Other Elizabethan texts, of whatever description, were increasingly read as a context for Shakespeare's supreme creative

achievement.

In 1795-6, then, fears that Shakespeare's own papers, and other papers connected with him, had been lost were to some extent balanced by illusory hopes that such papers might still show up, somewhere. This situation explains the incredible excitement generated by the Ireland forgeries, and the appearance of *Falstaff's Letters* as a satire on that event. White's preface announces a discovery, but in two senses this discovery involves a realization of loss. Literally, the loss is of the imaginary letters utilized for culinary purposes by the imaginary maiden-sister. Beyond this, though, the topical satire of the book draws attention to the real loss of real manuscripts—the criminal negligence of such custodians of the national heritage as Warburton. That loss had acted as a spur to Ireland's imagination, just as it had to Wilmot's. Indeed it is worth emphasizing that the "roast pig" passage comments more profoundly on the Ireland forgeries than White or Lamb can have suspected, precisely because they shared concerns with the Irelands.

In his later *Confessions*, a narrative of his Shakespeare fabrications, William Henry Ireland described how, in 1794, he had accompanied his father on a visit to Stratford-upon-Avon. The latter, a successful engraver, was planning a volume of *Picturesque Views on the Upper, or Warwickshire Avon*. During his time in Stratford Ireland senior became more and more obsessed with Shakespearean trivia and, accordingly, an easy target for local fraudsters. Ireland recounts a visit he and his father paid to Clopton House near Stratford, having heard that manuscripts had been removed there from New Place, Shakespeare's home. They found Clopton House occupied by a Mr Williams, "a gentleman-farmer; rich in gold and the worldly means of accumulating wealth, but devoid of every polished refinement" (30). Samuel Ireland explained the purpose of their visit, and

... the following was the reply made by Mr. Williams.—

“By G—d I wish you had arrived a little sooner! Why, it isn't a fortnight since I destroyed several baskets-full of letters and papers, in order to clear a small chamber for some young partridges which I wish to bring up alive: and as to Shakspeare [sic], why there were many bundles with his name wrote upon them. Why it was in this very fire-place I made a roaring bonfire of them.” (30-31)

At this point, Ireland goes on, his father started from his chair and

... clasped his hands together, exclaiming

“My G—d! Sir, you are not aware of the loss which the world has sustained. Would to heaven I had arrived sooner!” (31)

Mr Williams then calls his wife and

... thus addressed her:

“My dear, don't you remember bringing me down those baskets of papers from the partridge-room? and that I told you there were some about Shakspeare the poet?”

The old lady immediately replied as follows, having, in all probability, heard Mr. Ireland's address to her husband:

“Yes, my dear; I do remember it perfectly well! and, if you will call to mind my words, I told you not to burn the papers, as they might be of consequence.” (32)

Before they left the Irelands carefully examined every nook and cranny in the house. They found no trace of any old manuscripts.

One is reminded that Ireland junior possessed some talent as a playwright and novelist in reading the lively dialogue he attributes to Mr and Mrs Williams and his father. The passage reads as a satire on a pair of antiquarian gulls rather than a true “confession” of a clever hoaxer; the comedy anticipates

comparable episodes in Scott's *The Antiquary* and Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. But the story is so obviously absurd that one has to conclude, I think, that it is probably true—that is, that some such conversation occurred, albeit that the published version may have been trimmed and polished with literary instinct. It certainly underlines the naïveté that accompanied the Irelands' imposture. Ireland junior claimed in his *Confessions* that it was when he saw how much value his father attached to Shakespearean remains that he was tempted to start forging just the kind of papers that might have been destroyed in the bonfire at Clopton House. When White sat down to make fun of the Ireland case in 1796 he can have had no idea that the Irelands had been disappointed in their search for *genuine* manuscripts; nevertheless, the “roast pig” passage seems unwittingly to make fun of the sort of destruction that the Irelands had heard of, and believed, at Clopton House.

Mr Williams later told the Stratford antiquary, Robert Bell Wheler, that he had deliberately hoaxed the Irelands (Schoenbaum 134). There is some thought-provoking irony in the fact that William Henry Ireland's false tales of manuscripts “discovered” were directly prompted by this false tale of manuscripts lost. But Ireland's refusal to accept the obvious facts of loss, whatever the silly lengths it took him too, chimed in well with the concerns of a late 1700s Shakespeare industry committed to arresting as much as possible any damage inflicted by time: by, for example, determining and glossing Shakespeare's meaning; discovering and saving old quartos and the textual variants they contained; and hunting down scraps of oral history connected with Shakespeare's life and work. Ireland's forgeries, though, had the effect, if not the intention, of mocking the efforts of the scholars, which doubtless explains the fierce tone of Malone's *Inquiry*, exposing the fraud, and Ireland's subsequent pariahdom. *Falstaff's Letters* laughs at Ireland, but

laughs at the scholars too. *Falstaff's Letters* emerged at an interesting juncture in literary history, indeed, because a new "Romantic" generation was starting to find the idea of an unknown and unknowable Shakespeare rather attractive. Instead of being frustrated, like Wilmot, at the absence of a proper biography, they found a potent imaginative appeal in a mysterious Shakespeare. To them, Shakespeare was not Bacon; rather, he was anyone he was required to be, which was usually a quasi-divine figure. One result was that Lamb's generation could joke about the loss of Shakespearean manuscripts in a way that Malone's could not.

4. The Past in Fragments

Falstaff's Letters presents itself as a fragmentary or incomplete work surviving from an earlier age. As such it assumes a similar shape to a number of key pre-Romantic texts. The first of these was perhaps James Macpherson's Ossian poems of 1760-63, purporting to be translations of Gaelic originals from ancient Scotland, preserved by oral tradition. Soon afterwards followed Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, Gray's Norse translations, Chatterton's fake Medieval poems, and Charlotte Reeve's pioneering "Gothic" novel, *The Old English Baron* (1778). All these works invent or modify traditions which flow into Romanticism, and most of them are concerned in some way with the depredations of time and neglect on their physical substance (whether that substance was originally real or imaginary), a concern the Romantics internalized and reproduced in their own "fragments." All, in various ways, set themselves against the age of Pope (and John Warburton). Lucas speculated "that White's zest in the making of this book [*Falstaff's Letters*] helped towards Lamb's Elizabethanising" (Lamb, *Works* 1: 467). That "Elizabethanising," like Wordsworth's balladeering, was essentially an

attempt to renew literary culture through the recovery of a kind of imaginative writing which seemed superior to anything the earlier eighteenth century had produced, a tendency which can be traced back at least as far as Macpherson. Of course, unlike the other works mentioned here, *Falstaff's Letters* draws attention to its own fabricated nature, both participating in and laughing at the whole process of what Marilyn Butler calls "repossessing the past."

Something of the same tone prevails in the only other substantial work of White's to survive. As noted above, he seems to have published nothing after *Falstaff's Letters*, but the British Library owns his travel diary, a "Picturesque Excursion into South Wales," written in 1805, possibly with a view to publication. White undertook the excursion with an antiquarian friend named only as "B." Throughout, he combines a gentle mockery of B's enthusiasms with a more moderate enjoyment of antiquarian pleasures himself. White found a charm in ruins, but there is no suggestion that he was inclined to brood over them in the manner of some of his more "Romantic" contemporaries. The "Picturesque Excursion" is, in part, a sly satire on antiquarianism, somewhat akin to those passages in Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816) in which the narrator gently mocks his hero.

The connection of *Falstaff's Letters* with Lamb's later work is more complex and intriguing. As demonstrated above, the "roast pig" passage was felt by many Lamb scholars of an earlier age to be profoundly "Elian," and we are now in a position to understand better what that might mean. To maintain that the "Dissertation upon Roast Pig" is anticipated is clearly to labor a very superficial point. The Elian quality of the passage is more profound, and resides in the sentimentality, the comic pathos, and the effective oddness of the language used to evoke it. The pathos is a product of destroying

time, which sometimes leaves enough behind for us to measure the value of what is lost. At such times, that which survives encourages us to various kinds of imaginative compensation for that which is lost, including, in the case of Shakespeare's papers, conspiracy theories (Wilmot), forgery (Ireland), pastiche and humor (White and Lamb), and Shakespeare worship (any number of people). The language of the *Falstaff's Letters* preface adds resonance to the idea by making the past seem close and vivid, with its almost childish delight in the sound of words, long words, and tongue-twisters, yet also strangely alien, in its odd, archaic diction and grammar. The total effect is comparable to that of those gloomy seventeenth-century Dutch kitchen paintings where a sense of physical immediacy is coupled, for the modern viewer, with a distancing, museum-like quality. The pleasures of the past are as obvious as its ever increasing distance from us, an idea Lamb conveys, using similar linguistic means, in many of his mature essays.

Lamb is a master of the sense of the fragmentary that is pervasive in a lot of Romantic writing. Like Scott, he loved the past because he found it stimulating to the imagination and perhaps more susceptible to imaginative control than the uncertain present. But unlike Scott, he did not "repossess" the past with historical research and the panoramic sweep of the historical novel. Rather, his development of the familiar essay allowed him to reveal the fullness of the past in the precisely realized thought, description, or memory—and here he follows Sterne—which persuades the reader that the past can be grasped most profoundly as a series of evocative fragments, and perhaps in no other way. The sort of authorial imaginative adhesive which holds a Scott novel together is replaced by a series of white spaces in which the reader is encouraged to do what Lamb, discussing Hogarth, calls "*imaginary work*," "where the spectator must meet the artist in his conceptions

half way” (*Works* 1: 74). Lamb’s writing, in other words, works to stimulate a sympathetic nostalgia in his reader.

Any attempt to “repossess the past” inevitably runs up against the problem of there being no obvious limits to the project—an experience well known to scholars of literature and the other arts. The Ireland phenomenon illustrates this. William Henry Ireland’s forgeries of Shakespeare’s papers grew bolder and bolder and longer and longer to the point where he started producing complete “lost” plays. It is impossible to say how long he might have gone on, how many “lost” works might have surfaced, had he not been crushed by Malone’s ruthless *Inquiry*. Scott, the most historical of the creative writers of his generation, was also the most prolific, at times seeming almost desperate in his quest to fix a rapidly receding past in imaginative form. Although Lamb was equally sensitive to the danger of the past slipping away, he never attempted such Herculean resistance. The total volume of his work is surprisingly small, and the “roast pig” passage in *Falstaff’s Letters* is a suggestive point of origin for that work because it immediately establishes the limits of a particular act of (imaginary) repossession and explains why the work which follows is in fragmentary form. Reading back through Lamb’s later work, we can glimpse, beyond the genial satire on Warburton and his cook, the suggestion that the Epicurean maiden sisters are everywhere, even inside us, and inevitably so: the past (including everything from personal recollection to the earliest human records) is always too big and complex to preserve entire. The challenge has always been twofold: on one hand, to sort and organize, to recognize the value of things in time, to anticipate our future needs; on the other, to deal with our inevitable failure to do so. These are pregnant ideas in Lamb’s later essays, which balance survival against decay, memory against forgetting, celebration against lament. Elia, Lamb’s supreme

alter ego, emerged in the 1820s as a character who, having thought long and hard about what is important to him, is still surprised by new discoveries. It is often the very absence, or loss, of things which leads him to see their importance.

There is an ironic twist to all this in the fact that by the 1860s and 70s scraps of Eliana were looked for with all the enthusiasm and something of the assiduity earlier directed to Shakespearean materials. It was feared, correctly, that some of Lamb's papers and occasional and anonymous publications might have got lost. In this climate the "roast pig" passage in *Falstaff's Letters* was first claimed as a fragment of Lamb's work: a fragment, in that case, written to explain the fact of fragmentation.

Postscript: Peter Ackroyd's *The Lambs of London*

Any provable connection between Lamb and William Henry Ireland rests on the "hints and corrections" that the former contributed to *Falstaff's Letters*, and his subsequent enthusiastic promotion of the book. In August 2004, however, Peter Ackroyd published a carefully researched historical novel, *The Lambs of London*, which imagines a more profound association. At the centre of his plot, Ackroyd links two historical incidents: Malone's devastating expose of Ireland's forgeries on 31 March 1796, and the fit of madness in which Mary Lamb, Lamb's sister, killed her mother on 22 September the same year. In *The Lambs of London* Mary develops a strange, intense, hesitating relationship with Ireland that never quite becomes romantic; a great lover of literature, "new" Shakespeare provides her an exciting and much needed imaginative escape from the stifling pressure of her life at home. Ireland, whose "ambition was matched only by his self-distrust; he aspired to success but expected failure" (25) seems almost as highly-strung as her;

he stakes his whole identity on convincing the world of the genuineness of his Shakespeare papers. Beside these deeply serious characters, Lamb himself, anachronistically writing the *Essays of Elia*, is gently cynical, witty, and irreverent. He is only partially taken in by Ireland's forgeries, and hence immune to disappointment, but Mary is devastated when she learns the truth: this, the story suggests, finally unbalances her already unstable mind and pushes her into a fit of matricidal madness. The dangers inherent in presuming too much on our ability to "repossess the past" could hardly be more forcibly expressed.

Ackroyd plays with his well-read reader, placing a number of quotations from Romantic period literature in the conversation of characters not normally credited with those eloquent profundities. Most strikingly, Ireland speaks a number of passages from the *Essays of Elia*. There is even a final literary joke, I take it, when Ackroyd quotes a supposed "paragraph in the *Morning Chronicle*," responding to Ireland's public confession of his deception:

W. H. Ireland has come forward and announced himself author of the papers attributed by him to Shakespeare; which, if *true*, proves him to be a *liar*. (213)

Lamb himself pointed out that Elia is an anagram of "a lie" (Lucas, *Life 2*: 42) and in the twentieth century his pseudonym came to be widely pronounced "a liar" (Lamb himself seems to have pronounced it Ell-i-a, with long "I" sound). Paradoxically, then, Ireland becomes Elia when he admits to forging Shakespeare, while Elia himself quietly (fraudulently?) appropriates the good things in other people's conversation. The suggestion, perhaps, is that these two men, with such different reputations—the forger and the classic essayist—are not so much opposites as different sides of the same coin.

Notes

- 1 A spurious "Second Edition" of 1797 was simply the unsold remainder of the first edition reissued with a new title page. A pirated American edition was brought out in Philadelphia in 1813.
- 2 For a full biography of White see Chandler.
- 3 This is George Steevens's transcription, which is not perfectly accurate, but the one White and Lamb would have known (see below). A more accurate transcription can be found in Greg.
- 4 This edition was published, misleadingly, as edited by Isaac Reed (who was responsible for later variorum editions). Arthur Sherbo has shown that the real editor was Steevens, however (140-1); it is not clear why Steevens attempted to conceal his responsibility for the edition.
- 5 Freehafer found in the *Biographia Dramatica* "more than fifty unnoted references to Warburton's play collection" (160). He appears only to have read through the second volume, which catalogues plays. The first volume, which catalogues writers, includes the following note after a list of Massinger's plays: "Those marked 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, were in the possession of Mr. Warburton, Somerset Herald, and destroyed through the ignorance of his servant" (Baker 1: 306). This appears to be the most complete version of the story published before 1793.
- 6 Wilmot's pioneering importance as an "anti-Stratfordian" was first revealed by Nicoll, who provides a full account of the matter. Not much further information on Wilmot and Shakespeare has come to light since, but Schoenbaum adds a few details (397-9).

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