THE WORKS OF LADY CAROLINE LAMB

Eds. Leigh Wetherall Dickson and Paul Douglass
(Pickering & Chatto, 2009) Volume 1: Glenarvon: lii + 451; Volume 2: Graham Hamilton and Poems xxx + 229; Volume 3: Ada Reis, A Tale xx + 222.
Reviewed by Lindsey Eckert on 2009-09-01.

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Lady Caroline Lamb has had less than her due. If mentioned at all, she is usually footnoted as Lord Byron's mistress, the one who, as he vulgarly put it, chose to "---- and publish" rather than simply kiss and tell (Dickson and Douglass 1: xvii). Unfortunately, Byron's dismissal of Lamb and her first novel *Glenarvon* (1816) has been echoed by reviewers and academics from the nineteenth century onward. Indeed, as Leigh Wetherall Dickson and Paul Douglass note in the General Introduction to their new three-volume edition of her works, "Most critics and scholars have treated Lamb's novels and poetry as at best a devious attempt to hurt Byron, and at worst the production of a neurotic mind unable to grasp reality" (1: ix). Challenging this received notion of Lamb as a lovesick woman with little literary talent, this new edition presents insightfully annotated and introduced texts of Lamb's novels *Glenarvon*, *Graham Hamilton* (1822), and *Ada Reis, A Tale* (1823) alongside her published and hitherto unpublished poems.

Until now, simply locating Lamb's works was difficult. *Graham Hamilton* and *Ada Reis* have never been republished since their respective first editions. (One notable exception is a Paris edition of *Ada Reis,* published by A. and W. Galignani in 1824, which condenses and modifies the 1823 text.) And though the Byronic poem *A New Canto* (1819) was included in the first and second editions of Duncan Wu's *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 1994 and 1998), many of her other poems have not been reprinted since the nineteenth century and, in some cases, never have been published at all. Dickson and Douglass's edition, therefore, gives scholars unprecedented access to Lamb's texts. Combined with Paul Douglass's *Lady Caroline Lamb: A Biography* (Palgrave, 2004) and *The Whole Disgraceful Truth: Selected Letters of Lady Caroline Lamb* (Palgrave, 2006), this edition of Lamb's novels and poetry provides the tools scholars need to begin more serious inquiries into Lamb, her works, and their relationship to nineteenth-century print culture. The precedent Dickson and Douglass set by considering Lamb's novels and poems from an attentive, scholarly perspective and including a comprehensive bibliography of articles and works about her should make it difficult for those studying the nineteenth century to continue to neglect Lamb or simply continue reading her works in a limiting Byronic frame.

Without overlooking Byron's importance, the editors of *The Works of Lady Caroline Lamb* do much to show the larger social, political, and literary climate in which Lamb lived, wrote, and published. The introductions and notes to Lamb's poetry and each of her novels outline their more obvious relations to Byron as well as other (and often more interesting) connections to Whig politics, the gendered legal inequalities of marriage, and the lavish dissipation of the English aristocracy. In her novels and poems, Lamb consistently returns to the gap between reputation and reality. From the depiction of rumor-mongering London society in *Graham Hamilton* to the imagined Hell in *Ada Reis*, where women are punished not for "any actual misconduct" but "for having fallen under the suspicion of errors," Lamb focuses on the tension between perceived or public truth and private reality (3: 178). Scrutinized by her peers for her public affairs and indecorous behavior, Lamb in turn scrutinized the period in which she lived, and her works often expose the flaccid underbelly of elite society. Lamb's study of the contrast between ideas of the public and the private connects her both implicitly and explicitly to other authors of the period such as Frances Burney, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and, obviously, Lord Byron.

Glenarvon is the most challenging of Lamb's works to present outside Byron's influence. The introduction and notes to Douglass's edition of the novel explain the allusions to Byron, but they also highlight other important elements of the text such as its political setting during the 1798 Irish Rebellion and its criticisms of aristocratic hypocrisy. Furthermore, while several other modern facsimile and paperback editions of *Glenarvon* are available, Douglass's attentiveness to the multiple versions of the novel make his edition especially useful. Using the first edition-the first of three published in 1816-as his copy-text, Douglass reveals the significant changes Lamb made in subsequent editions. A 62-page section at the end of the volume details the variants found in the second and third editions of 1816 and the fourth edition published in 1817. These variants, especially numerous in the second edition of 1816, allow us to see Lamb as a serious writer making many stylistic alterations to her novel, often refining her diction as well as toning down sexual allusions. I cannot help wondering whether some, or perhaps many, of the variants in punctuation thoroughly noted by Douglass may have been produced by the compositor rather than, as he suggests, Lamb's own editorial pen (Douglass 1: xxxiii). However, more substantive additions and deletions do indicate Lamb's keen interest in revising her work.

Especially fascinating is the discovery of a copy of the first edition of *Glenarvon* with Lamb's notes for its revision. Though Lamb appears to have edited the volumes for the printer, her revisions in the copy now at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Netherlands differ from those actually made to the second edition of 1816. It's not always easy to compare the two. We could use more information about the Koninklijke copy, and since Douglass puts Lamb's corrections from it into his explanatory endnotes rather than juxtaposing them with the printed textual variants, we have trouble following Lamb's (intended) revision process. Still, Douglass presents much helpful material in both his notes and his appendices, which reprint Lamb's two different prefaces to *Glenarvon*. To study this material is to track Lamb's changing perception of herself as an author.

Lamb's second novel, *Graham Hamilton*, edited by Dickson, is for me the highlight of the edition, and perhaps the new availability of the novel will encourage its publication in a more affordable format. Shorter than *Glenarvon*, with fewer characters and a more straightforward plot, *Graham Hamilton* shows Lamb drawing from authors such as Godwin, Burney, and Wollstonecraft. Graham's conversation with Mr. M., to whom he tells the story of his downfall, offers readers a confessional frame narrative not unlike Godwin's *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). The novel traces Graham through his introduction to London society, his dangerous infatuation with the young and unhappy Lady Orville, and his betrayal of his childhood sweetheart Gertrude, to the eventual dissipation of his uncle's fortune. As the editors note, Byron is not the most important influence here, and we see Lamb paying homage to other literary figures. The dire nature of Graham's adventures, his downfall and the subsequent destruction of those he loves show the novel to be Lamb's sardonic response to the happier tales of love found in novels such as Burney's *Evelina* (1778), a debt that, as Dickson points out, Lamb "acknowledged in the naming of *Graham Hamilton*'s characters, the most obvious being Lady Orville" (2: x). Though it is difficult not to see traces of Lamb's own troubled passions in the novel, Dickson rightly state that the blurring of fact and fiction in *Graham Hamilton*-such an essential point of Lamb's first novel-largely concerns Lamb's aunt, Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. Lamb's fictionalized portrayal of her aunt and her general exposure of the inner workings and corruption of the aristocracy mark *Graham Hamilton* as an important precursor to the silver-fork novel -a subgenre which, groomed by Lamb's publisher Henry Colburn, would have a significant influence on the nineteenth-century literary and political scene (see General Introduction 1: xix). Writing from the "inside," Lamb paints a portrait of her contemporary society which though outwardly full of lavishness and life, is inwardly full of moral and financial corruption.

The theme of corruption is taken further in *Ada Reis, A Tale*, which amalgamates a fictional travel narrative, a society novel, and a romance. Consumed by a prophecy that his daughter, Fiormonda, will rule a kingdom and that his own corruptions will be allowed without question, Ada is goaded into further moral indiscretions by the shape-shifting, devilish Kabkarra. The Byronic figure of Condulmar preys on the once-innocent Fiormonda, leading her into an unfulfilled, immoral relationship bordering on obsession. The damning observations on society found in both *Glenarvon* and *Graham Hamilton* are carried to a further, literal extreme in Lamb's final novel. Her version of Hell contains "negro-lashers" and "hangmen" as well as those "who possessed rank, dignity, and riches [...] but, misspending every moment in idleness and folly, have proved the cause of ruin to others" (3: 171; 3: 170). Dickson's notes, which translate lengthy French passages and gloss the various literary allusions in Lamb's own often-convoluted authorial endnotes, provide useful aids for reading a novel that at times can be hard going.

The poetry contained in the second half of volume two will save future scholars the time and travel funds it would take to track Lamb's poetry in libraries from Oxford and Leeds to Hertford and Edinburgh. By gathering poems

from Lamb's letters, manuscript gift books, anonymous publications, novels, songs, and contributions to literary annuals, Dickson and Douglass provide what appears to be Lamb's entire poetic oeuvre. Ranging from short lyrics and songs to her two longer Byronic satires, Lamb's poems continue to address many of the same themes as her novels. Lamb's Byronic poems, *A New Canto* and *Gordon: A Tale*, offer some of her most biting observations about Byron. In *A New Canto*, one of the most skillful Byronic satires ever written, Lamb accuses Byron of self-aggrandizement and only seeking to keep his "name in capitals, like Kean" (2: 249). More generally, she also condemns London as "an odious place, too, in these modern times" (2: 147). As in her novels, Lamb gauges the difference between appearance and reality, as in the contrast between a name in capitals and a capital that is crumbling. As Dickson and Douglass observe, Lamb "peels back the veneer in her recurring portraits of aristocrats as fakes," and her poems show these fakes to include Byron and herself (1: xiii).

Lamb's shorter poems poignantly express the disjunction between public life and private pain. In "Thou Would'st Not Do What I have Done," she laments private sadness that must be concealed in public:

> If thou could'st know what 'tis to smile,
>
> To smile, whilst scorned by every one,
>
> To hide by many an artful wile,
>
> A heart that knows more grief than guile,
>
> Thou would'st not do what I have done. (2: 180)

In many of these shorter lyrics, the wit found in *A New Canto* and *Gordon: A Tale* gives way to pathos. And though perhaps similar to Byron's sentiments in the Thyrza-cycle

"One struggle more" ("The smile that sorrow fain would wear / But mocks the woe that lurks beneath, / Like roses o'er a sepulchre" [18-20]), Lamb's lyrics remain her own, and we find her lamenting both her own situation as well as the more general corrupt state of the society she inhabits.

These volumes leave just a little to lament. While offering a much-needed edition of Lamb's works, they are not without shortcomings. Most notably, the absence of a general note about editorial principles is problematic-especially in the case of *Glenarvon* and many of Lamb's poems, which exist in multiple versions. *Ada Reis*, edited by Dickson, includes a helpful note on the text, pointing to complications arising from Lamb's original text and outlining how she has dealt with these issues. Similar notes at the front of volumes one and two, or perhaps an editorial note for the entire edition, would have been welcome additions. Also, the hard and helpful work that Dickson and Douglass have done to trace the textual variants of Lamb's poems is undermined by the fact that the page numbers in the textual variants section do not reliably correspond with the actual pagination of the volume itself. Thus, "To a Lanky Cur I Lov'd At that Time" begins on page 119, yet variants a-d of that poem are listed as being on page 120. Finally, those (like me) who are particularly interested in the genre of literary annuals might also wish to know that, in addition to the four Lamb poems published in literary annuals from 1826-1830 and included in Dickson and Douglass's edition, Lamb's poem "Couldst Thou But Know" (a version of "Thou Would'st Not Do What I have Done") was published in *The Lyre* in 1830 alongside poems by Byron, Percy Shelley, and Letitia Elizabeth Landon.

One of the best things Dickson and Douglass's edition offers is the opportunity to consider Lamb's works together, thus foregrounding themes and issues that will be of interest to scholars who previously might have given Lamb little thought. Calling attention to her scathing exposure of the weaknesses of her class, her poignant representations of hypocritical and gendered standards of social acceptability, and her engagement with ideas about fiction and reality, this new edition shows Lamb to be much more than Byron's slighted lover.

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Paul Douglass and Leigh Wetherall Dickson respond:

Lindsey Eckert's review of the Pickering & Chatto three-volume edition of the *Works of Lady Caroline Lamb* offers a fair and balanced assessment. The editors would like to respond only to provide a bit more context for readers,

and a suggestion for future directions of research. A point of clarification: The editorial labor was divided between Dickson and Douglass so that the former worked on *Ada Reis* and *Graham Hamilton*, and the latter undertook editing the poetry and *Glenarvon*. The introductory essays were written by the respective editor, but shared and revised in concert.

A great deal of information about *Glenarvon* emerged at the last moment, including knowledge of the existence in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Netherlands of a copy of the novel containing what appear to be Lamb's editorial notes and perhaps the notes of a copyeditor possibly named Walters. Alas, there was barely time to incorporate notes on Lamb's emendations into the P&C edition in the explanatory material as it existed. More needs to be done with this copy. The discoverer, Ria Grimbergen, and Paul Douglass are preparing an article the relation of Lamb's notes to the actual changes made in the second edition of the novel.

The editors are grateful to know of the existence of another printing of a Lamb poem in an annual-the one in *The Lyre* pointed out by the reviewer. We believe there will be others that will come to light, and express the hope that any discoveries will be made known to us. We are also hopeful that at some point a researcher will find the first nineteenth-century mention of Lamb as the author of *A New Canto*.

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