

# Shakespeare and Education in the Lambs'

## *Poetry for Children and Tales from Shakespeare*

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### Abstract

This essay discusses the role of Shakespeare in Mary and Charles Lamb's *Poetry for Children* (1809; Lamb and Lamb 1970) and *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807; Lamb and Lamb 1993), arguing that the Lambs use sibling education to help in the understanding of Shakespeare. Drawing on Romantic-era notions of family instruction, the Lambs invoke a model of brother-sister tutelage to show that fraternal supervision aids in a sister's intellectual development and understanding of Shakespeare. The Lambs, however, also rework this traditional, hierarchical model to illustrate that brother-sister education can encourage a cooperative and reciprocal learning of Shakespeare.

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Two years after William Godwin published Mary and Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* for the Juvenile Library (1807), the Lambs coauthored a verse book for young girls and boys. *Poetry for Children* (1809) was first printed in two miniature volumes and "ornamented with two beautiful frontispieces" (Lamb and Lamb 1970, xv). In a letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles refers to the composition of these elegantly-packaged poems as "task-work" ("Letter," in Lamb 1963, 772). More than menial labor, however, *Poetry for Children* exemplifies a theory of childhood education that Mary had previously outlined in the Preface to *Tales from Shakespeare*: "Instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand" (Lamb and Lamb 1993, xiv). Using this method of instruction, brothers facilitate an understanding of Shakespeare by explicating scenes from the tales and by selecting ethical and prudent passages to read aloud to siblings: "what is proper for a young sister's ear" (xiv). The Lambs' *Poetry for Children* shares with *Tales from Shakespeare* an emphasis on brother-sister tutelage. Both texts endorse the didactic role of brothers as educators.

Although *Poetry for Children* situates the teaching of Shakespeare in the context of popular early nineteenth-century models of male tutorship and training, it also offers an alternative model of fraternal guidance and supervision in female educational development: brother-sister education is revised to include a representation of cooperation and reciprocity in book learning. Sharing the experience of reading Shakespeare not only strengthens the familial bond of siblings, but it also allows the sister greater autonomy both as learner and teacher. In doing so, *Poetry for Children* challenges the idea of a young boy's mastery over his sister and his supremacy in book learning and Shakespeare.

### The Lambs and Romantic Educational Theory

Before analyzing the poems that specifically address the study of Shakespeare, it will be useful to discuss briefly the educational theories that the Lambs promote and adapt in their texts. The Lambs' model of family education parallels the approach popularized in Henrietta Maria and Thomas Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare*, initially published the same year as the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807; Bowdler and Bowdler 1863). Just as the Lamb siblings collaborated on retelling Shakespeare's plays, so too did the brother-sister pair, Harriet and Thomas, compile an edition of Shakespeare. The Bowdlers' *Family Shakespeare* provides a stratagem for introducing Shakespeare to youth. In the Preface to the first edition of the volume, Thomas Bowdler asserts the necessity for supervision in the reading of Shakespeare: "I can hardly imagine a more pleasing occupation for a winter's evening in the country, than for a father to read one of Shakespeare's plays to his family circle" (Bowdler and Bowdler 1863, viii). Although knowledge of Shakespeare is mediated here through the father, not a brother, Bowdler's approach also suggests the need for a male relative's censorial mediation. Ostensibly, the purpose of *The Family Shakespeare* was to eradicate improper language from Shakespeare's plays. By using an expurgated text, fathers avoid the chagrin of exposing their families unintentionally to indecent passages or "falling unawares among words and expressions which are of such a nature as to raise a blush on the cheek of modesty" (viii). The importance of reading Shakespeare to the family is not in question. As a symbol of English cultural achievement, Shakespeare occupies a critical position in childhood pedagogy. The question, however, of Shakespeare's readership — who should or could read the plays — brings into sharp focus theories on family education, especially for children.

Efforts by the Lambs and the Bowdlers to excise and abridge Shakespeare, or at least to frame him properly for a female audience, stem from Romantic-era principles of education. The growth of a mass reading public in the early nineteenth century caused great concern and debate over what constituted the best use of books for childhood education. As Alan Richardson

points out, "it increasingly became the role of educational institutions to monitor and facilitate the proper ideological functions of literary texts" (Richardson 1994, 31). Furthermore, the monitoring and censoring of texts, ones that were increasingly accessible to even the lower classes, became a prime concern for educational tracts on private instruction. Thus, while religious authors and Enlightenment theorists disagreed considerably, many agreed on the danger of unsupervised reading of imaginative texts. For example, Anna Barbauld and Sarah Trimmer, due to their religious emphasis, shunned imaginative texts in favor of non-fiction works. Such calculated censorship of children's reading sparked Charles Lamb's famous letter to Coleridge about the negative effects of this trend:

Mrs. Barbauld's stuff has banished all the old classics of the nursery. . . . Mrs. Barbauld's and Mrs. Trimmer's nonsense lay in piles about. . . . Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if, instead of being fed with Tales and old wives' fables in childhood you have been crammed with geography and natural history! Hang them! — I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those blights & blasts of all that is human in man and child. ("Letter," in Lamb 1963, 727)

While Charles may have approved of less overt censorship in the form of fraternal discipline and supervision, he rejects the extremist agenda that replaces creative pieces with "geography and natural history."<sup>1</sup> This disapproval of efforts to prohibit young children access to the repertoire of standard nursery rhymes and tales arguably applies to other educational authors. Influenced by the rationalism of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Maria Edgeworth, and Mary Wollstonecraft likewise were, as we shall see, skeptical of the benefit of imaginative writings for young readers.<sup>2</sup> As Gillian Avery points out, both rational and religious proponents "persuaded the public that works of imagination could only stunt the growth of the child's mind" (Avery 1975, 14). Warning of the perils of unsavory books, texts that fostered fantasy and escape, emerged as a primary concern for Romantic-era theorists.

Despite this atmosphere of censorship, Shakespeare was not entirely absent from the early nineteenth-century canon of children's literature. Indeed, the second part of John Newberry's *Mother Goose's Melody; or Sonnets for the Cradle* consisted of songs from Shakespeare, "that sweet Songster and Nurse of Wit and Humour" (Newberry 1975, title page). Even though the "sweet Songster" is reduced here to lullabies and bedtime ditties, Shakespeare's presence in a verse anthology gains significance in light of Romantic-era efforts to stamp out fanciful writing. As M. F. Thwaite points out, the playwright's inclusion was "a notable innovation, for rarely for some time to come were such pearls to be set before young readers in anthologies of verse

or any other form" (Thwaite 1963, 45). Similarly, in her anthology, *The Female Reader* (1789; Wollstonecraft 1989a), Wollstonecraft provides selections from Shakespeare, but she carefully frames these passages to emphasize aesthetic and moral values, and her objective lies in fortifying and sharpening a young woman's reason and judgment: "The main object of this work is to imprint some useful lessons on the mind, and cultivate the taste at the same time — to infuse a relish for pure and simple style, by presenting natural and touching scenes from the Scriptures, Shakespeare, etc." (Wollstonecraft 1989a, iv). In essence, even though Shakespeare in the late eighteenth century was presented in anthologies, he was contained: the anthology itself acted as a censor.

For many authors, exposure to the Bard was especially risky for young women. Censoring Shakespeare thus develops into a crucial issue. For example, in her *Personal Recollections*, Charlotte Elizabeth, a devout Evangelical, recalls the thrill of drinking from the exhilarating Shakespeare: "I drank a cup of intoxication under which my brain reeled for many a year" (Elizabeth 1840-1849, 29). She writes, "My mind became unnerved, my judgment perverted, my estimate of people and things wholly falsified, and my soul wrapped in the vain solace of unsubstantial enjoyments" (30). The notion that Shakespeare could render a young woman senseless points to the playwright's subversive potential. Moreover, Elizabeth's words describe the vulnerability of a young female who is debilitated by and overcome with the Bard. As Avery writes, "This view of the dangers that lurked in Shakespeare and in poetry was fairly general, and responsible parents . . . were very careful in the supervision of their daughter's reading" (Avery 1975, 34). An implicit seduction awaits the unchaperoned female reader, and strict parental surveillance becomes necessary to protect daughters from unsavory delirium.

The importance of supervision and its relationship to Shakespeare is exemplified clearly in Maria Edgeworth's *Practical Education* (1798; Edgeworth 2003b), a work jointly composed with her father. A follower of Locke's theories on education, Edgeworth encourages parents to exert authority over children by restricting and editing literary material: "Few books can safely be given to children without the previous use of the pen, the pencil, and the scissors" (Edgeworth 2003b, 185). Even though she does not specifically mention Shakespeare in this statement, Edgeworth's references to cutting and deleting texts anticipate Bowdler's excisions in *The Family Shakespeare*. According to Edgeworth, it is a father and mother's "duty to look over every page of a book before it is trusted to their children" (185). Edgeworth does not necessarily condemn the reading of Shakespeare, but she cautions against introducing sons and daughters to the plays before they are intellectually capable. As an example, Edgeworth recounts the story of two brothers (ages nine and twelve) who took a dislike to Shakespeare's *King John* one winter's evening because they could not understand the language. In a curious reversal, it is the family's older sister who possesses

the requisite aptitude to enjoy the playwright, "reading Shakespeare with great avidity" (365). The sister's developmental maturity has endowed her with the mental prowess to comprehend and appreciate the drama all the more: "If [the brother] had been pressed to read Shakespeare at the time when he did not understand it, he might never have read these plays with real pleasure during his whole life" (365). Edgeworth not only urges parents to supervise their children's reading, but she also promotes the censorship of those authors, including Shakespeare, whose writing surpasses age-appropriate skills.

The moral weight given to supervision and censorship in the childhood teaching of Shakespeare points to the necessity of intervention and mediation. Yet the issue of which parent or sibling should be responsible for teaching a son or daughter was a complex and debatable subject, and the problem of which parent should assume the responsibility of educating children was further magnified by the greater separation between the public and the domestic sphere in middle-class families. As noted previously, Bowdler envisions the father as the leading figure in the study of Shakespeare, and he evokes a memory of his own father's eloquence in the recitation of lines from *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*: "My first idea for *The Family Shakespeare* arose from the recollection of my father's custom of reading in this manner to his family" (Bowdler and Bowdler 1863, viii). Although ultimately she favors the rigor of private schooling, for instance, in *Practical Education* Edgeworth also asserts that a father's talent and temperament render him the most effective preceptor (Edgeworth 2003b, 293). By contrast, English and Continental writers as diverse as Hannah More, Wollstonecraft, and Rousseau posit that a mother, in theory and practice, would make the best educator: "[All] cited mothers as the proper instructors of moral edification, but even more so of the basic rudiments of reading and writing" (Marsden 1995, 31). Although opposed politically, both More and Wollstonecraft advocate the domestic sphere as a suitable place for instruction, primarily for female students. Apropos, each rails against boarding schools and the damage they inflict on young women. In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787; Wollstonecraft 1989c), Wollstonecraft argues against the education provided by boarding schools: "I must own it is my opinion, that the manners are too much attended to in all schools. . . . The temper is neglected, the same lessons are taught to all, and some get a smattering of things they have not capacity to understand; few things are learned thoroughly, but many follies contracted, and an immoderate fondness for dress among the rest" (Wollstonecraft 1989c, 22). As Avery points out, "All responsible authors, then, ranged themselves against the fashionable life, and usually included in their attacks on it, an attack on boarding schools" (Avery 1975, 28). The high value given to mothers as educators appears to undermine and challenge the validity or effectiveness of patriarchal learning; it also underscores the propriety of women's role in moral teaching and

in practical training. Whether theorists endorse the mother or father as tutors for their children, however, the very idea of parental supervision involves a pedagogical system of hierarchy and subordination.

If post-Enlightenment educators often defend the indispensability of parental supervision in the reading of Shakespeare, in "Of Choice in Reading" William Godwin denounces all surveillance and censorship as obstructions to intellectual growth and the attainment of knowledge (Godwin 1965). Godwin's progressive, libertarian beliefs lead him to indict the regulating and prohibiting of texts, most of all the kind of eye-opening, inspiring poetry found in Shakespeare. According to Godwin, forbidding and limiting access to books is tantamount to adult despotism and childhood imprisonment: "A wall of separation is thus erected between children and adults. They are made prisoners, and subject to certain arbitrary regulations; and we are constituted their jailors" (Godwin 1965, 130). In his essay, Godwin insinuates that daughters should receive the most heavy-handed supervision, but at the same time he disapproves of harmful interdiction and restraint, as well as the distrustful vigilance of parents. Equally mindful of males and females, Godwin declares the necessity of uninterrupted and unhindered reading because the individual, when barred from perusing written matter, can suffer unspecified, deleterious consequences. Considering his own past, Godwin states that "I cannot tell what I should have been, if Shakespear or Milton had not written" (140). This statement centers on an aesthetic notion that literary expression enhances the ethical formation of individuals and their societies. Because great thinkers such as Shakespeare or Milton contribute to a youth's maturation, not to mention cultivation, their verses deserve and invite unimpeded observation.

### Brother-Sister Tutelage in *Poetry for Children*

Although Godwin published the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* and *Poetry for Children*, Mary and Charles depart substantially from their publisher's pedagogical ideal of liberal contact with books. Despite Mary's own self-education in Samuel Salt's library, Mary and Charles provide warnings about unsupervised reading in another group of tales for children, *Mrs. Leicester's School* (1809).<sup>3</sup> In "The Young Mahometan," for instance, Margaret Green reads *Mahometism Explained*, even though she knows "it was very wrong to read any books without permission to do so" (Lamb n.d., 342). Similarly, in "The Witch Aunt," Maria Howe first recalls the wonder of free and unimpeded reading: "I was eternally fond of being shut up by myself, to take down whatever volumes I pleased, and pore upon them" (360). Later, however, Maria becomes so overcome by her imagination that she thinks her aunt is a witch. After she leaves her aunt's house, she transforms into an enlightened young woman expressly through supervised education: "No books were allowed

me but were rational and sprightly; that gave me mirth or gave me instruction" (369). Maria now realizes how far her "foolish and naughty fancy" had previously led her astray (370). These examples serve to illustrate the adverse effects of a young girl's initiation into the world of literature without the moral imperative of requisite guidance.

Monitoring a writer of Shakespeare's magnitude reinforces the tenet that females must remain passive in education. By contrast, the Lambs' model — in which brothers are requested to explain Shakespeare to sisters — makes interaction between siblings an essential component of the learning process. Concerning the model of brother-sister instruction that developed throughout the eighteenth century, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall write, "The brother acts as an 'indulgent monitor' to mould his sister into correct femininity. The sister influences him by passive example and expectation, never direct criticism or suggestion" (Davidoff and Hall 1987, 349). In addition to aiding them with the comprehension of texts, brothers help sisters establish proper gender etiquette: the "indulgent monitor" enables his sister to acquire well-bred conduct, while she contributes to her brother's betterment through indirection and patience. As Davidoff and Hall affirm, this relationship mirrors and finally presages that of the wedded state (348). The study of Shakespeare ideally reinforces a young male's position as master of the domestic learning environment, just as he will later assume mastery of the matrimonial household. The conflation of these two functions also suggests the social significance of a brother's dominance over his female sibling.

Jean Marsden argues that fraternal supervision and authority shapes the Lambs' construction of *Tales from Shakespeare*: "Shakespeare might be too strong for the sensibility of a young lady . . . but a modified version of Shakespeare" would be safer (Marsden 1989, 50). While this paradigm of brother-sister tutelage has direct relevance for the *Tales*, it undergoes a reevaluation in *Poetry for Children*. The ideology of brother-sister education is ultimately ambiguous: the paradigm can be shown to possess both a restrictive essence and also a liberating, progressive potential. As Donella Ruwe argues, *Poetry for Children* "uses brother and sister figures to expose the patriarchal structure of poetics — but stops short of radically subverting these structures or positing an alternative feminine poetics" (Ruwe 1997, 88). Yet by reconstituting brother-sister tutelage, the Lambs present a more progressive picture of sibling inculcation than has been previously accounted for, recommending a give-and-take exchange and mutual support in the study of Shakespeare.

In the Lambs' *Poetry for Children*, "The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin" seems to fit within the framework of mutual instruction in Shakespeare, but then reverts to an authoritative structure of brother-sister tutelage: in this rhyme, the brother's obligation is to educate his sister in Shakespeare and the works of English masters. The poem holds a significant place in the Lambs' volume, for it was popular enough to be reprinted with others in W. F. Mylius's

widely circulated *The First Book of Poetry for the Use of Schools*, published in 1811 by Godwin for the Juvenile Library (Mylius 1811).<sup>4</sup> Even though Mylius's book was intended for public use, his collection of verse would appeal naturally to contemporary pedagogical interests, including the topic of home schooling. Thus, in "The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin," a sister chides a brother for his neglect of her education. Preferring Latin over English authors, the "conceited" brother has forgotten, or sworn off, his fraternal obligation to his sibling's advancement:

We had used on winter eves  
To con over Shakespeare's leaves,  
Or on Milton's harder sense  
Exercise our diligence — ("The Sister's Expostulation," in Lamb and Lamb 1970,  
lines 1-4)

The sister's recollection evokes a picture of domestic solicitude, and it is not unlike Bowdler's romantic ideal of a father reading Shakespeare to his family on "a winter's evening in the country" (Bowdler and Bowdler 1963, viii). In the Lambs' poem, however, siblings share intimate time together, committing Shakespeare to heart and carefully scrutinizing his pages. Over and beyond the "harder" Milton, whose theological "sense" demands greater mental exertion, the two siblings equitably partake in the deciphering and apprehending of the poets.

Despite this commonality, the brother figure is assigned the role of master to his sister's apprenticeship. As the sister states,

And you would explain with ease  
The obscurer passages,  
Find me out the prettiest places,  
The poetic turns, and graces. ("The Sister's Expostulation," in Lamb and Lamb 1970,  
lines 13-16)

Because the brother excels in poetic judgment and cognition, he guides the sister through her confusion. But when the brother turns his attention to Latin, the sister is bereft of her Shakespeare and Milton teacher. Not only has the sister lost a friend, but she has also fallen into a state of despair and confusion: "I must puzzle out alone, / And oft miss the meaning quite, / Wanting you to set me right" (lines 18-20). Without her brother as preceptor, the sister remains bewildered and incapacitated by her inability to grasp signification. In this stanza, the Lambs make a vital distinction between gender and genre. Shakespeare and English poetry are relegated to an inferior



matrix of juvenile inculcation. By contrast, the attainment of Latin signifies a male realm of intellectual maturity and cultural sophistication. A familiarity with Latin is thus an entitlement from which a daughter is excluded. The sister conveys her feeling of alienation, criticizing the brother's preference for Latin over their mother tongue:

I much wonder  
 What great charm it is you see  
 In those words, *musa*, *musae*;  
 Or in what they do excel  
 Our word, *song*. (lines 22-26)

The sister sees no real distinction between "*musa*" or "*musae*," the first two Latin declensions of the word "song," and its English counterpart. Implicit in her criticism lies the stark reality of a young girl's exclusion from the classical paradigm of male training.

The poem "The Duty of a Brother" takes up and builds upon the theme of fraternal supervision in a sister's education. In this piece, though, it is the mother who chastises her son, Octavius. Willfully ignoring his sister, Octavius has failed to attend to the needs of her instruction. As such, the mother's chastisement registers the social practice of compartmentalizing boys and girls into prescribed codes of behavior. With overt condescension, the mother makes the sister dependent upon her brother's guardianship. The male at an early age is given the liberty to test his strength and agility outdoors, while the "less robust" female is confined within the parameter of indoors: "When over-toil'd from play you come, / You'll find in her an in-doors friend" ("The Duty of a Brother," in Lamb and Lamb 1970, lines 27-28). Returning home, Octavius is thus sharply reminded of his familial obligation to nurture his sister's progress in learning. Responsible to his sister as both caretaker and educator, the brother is asked to protect and supervise her:

Leave not our sister to another;  
 As long as both of you reside  
 In the same house, who but her brother  
 Should point her books, her studies guide? (lines 40-44)

Octavius's duty entails defending his sister from "ill-bred boys" and their "contempt of female merit," and it also demands that he adjudicate upon and chaperone her studies (lines 13, 18). This filial obligation is based partly on loyalties of kinship and blood ties. "The same milk," says the mother, "ye both were fed" (line 8). We can also discover in this passage the sort of pedagogical idea that occurs in the Preface to *Tales from Shakespeare*, in which brothers are requested to teach

Shakespeare to sisters. By guiding and pointing, Octavius exercises his strength, wisdom, and innate authority over his sister. The mother says:

If Nature, who allots our cup,  
Than her has made you stronger, wiser;  
It is that you, as you grow up,  
Should be her champion, her advisor. (lines 45-48)

The young champion, who in the last stanza is called a "*manly* boy," supervises his weaker and relatively defenseless sister (line 54). This form of family tutelage evokes a comparison with fraternal supervision in *Tales from Shakespeare*, especially with reference to brothers who read from the "manly book" of Shakespeare. As the Preface to the *Tales* states, "[brothers] frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book" (Lamb and Lamb 1993, xiv, italics added).<sup>5</sup> Although in these citations it is difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning of "manly," the word suggests stereotypical qualities of male adulthood and maturity. In "The Duty of a Brother," the role of advising a female sibling extends beyond the rudiments of book learning, or even explaining Shakespeare, to encompass adult counsel and advisement.

### Brother-Sister Tutelage in *Tales from Shakespeare*

In *Tales from Shakespeare*, the advisory role of brothers includes the job not only of helping sisters understand Shakespearean verses, but also of encouraging them to continue their engagement with the plays. According to the Preface, brothers instill in female siblings the passion to enhance further their familiarity with and progress in Shakespeare: "It is hoped that no worse effect will result than to make them [sisters] wish themselves a little older, that they may be allowed to read the Plays at full length" (Lamb and Lamb 1993, xiv). A brother's judicious handling of the drama, choosing or deleting scenes, fosters in a sister a genuine urge to explore the playwright on her own terms: "When time and leave of judicious friends shall put them [the plays] into their hands, they will discover in such of them as are here abridged . . . many surprising events" (xiv). If tutored correctly, sisters will, as a matter of course, desire access to the rich variety of Shakespeare's poetry, encountering the full complexity of his plots and language. Although a rapport with Shakespeare is first mediated through the superior craft of the brother, a young woman would eventually acquire the art of poetic interpretation.

In the Lambs' "The Duty of a Brother," the business of supervision moves beyond youthful monitoring of texts to adult advisement. The brother's office as protector also requires that he

provide sound moral direction to his maturing sibling. In a similar vein, this attention to fraternal guidance appertains to representations of brotherly guardianship in *Tales from Shakespeare*. In his retelling of *Hamlet*, for instance, Charles omits a critical brother-sister scene from act 1, scene 3 of the play. In this section, Laertes warns Ophelia of Hamlet's show of love: "For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor, / Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood" (Shakespeare 1997, 1.3.5-6). The excision of Laertes's advice serves to spotlight a fundamental philosophy of the *Tales*: brothers are requested to supervise Shakespeare and counsel prudently. Because the management of sisters requires discriminating coaching, a narrative that relates the plot of a brother who misleads a sister would be grounds for censorship.

In Charles's "Hamlet," the omission of Laertes's admonishment to Ophelia is not an oversight: the deletion betrays an anxiety about depicting a brother who gives incorrect or hurtful guidance to his sister. Let us look more closely at the scene in question. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Laertes, acting in a fraternal capacity, cautions Ophelia against the changeability of Hamlet's affection, a youthful sentiment "sweet, not lasting" (Shakespeare 1997, 1.3.8). According to Laertes, Hamlet not only seeks sexual intimacy with Ophelia, but his position as Prince of Denmark precludes his marrying a courtier's daughter: Ophelia's involvement with Hamlet will denigrate her honor, corrupting her chaste treasure (1.3.31-32). While Laertes's thinking may, indeed, stem from a sincere care for his sister's welfare and reputation, his governance is, in some sense, misdirected. As it will unfold, Hamlet's affection for Ophelia has grown deep, expressed candidly in his ardent love letters: "I love thee best, O most best, believe it" (2.2.121-22). Moreover, Gertude's statement at Ophelia's burial — "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (5.1.244) — suggests Ophelia's suitability for royal marriage. Laertes's ill counsel, which is reinforced by their father Polonius with greater crudity, contributes to Ophelia's and Hamlet's tragic misunderstanding in Shakespeare's play. Charles's retelling states, "Though the rough business which Hamlet had in hand, the revenging of his father's death upon his murderer, did not suit with the playful State of courtship, or admit the society of so idle a passion as love now seemed to him, yet it could not hinder but that soft thoughts of his Ophelia would come between . . ." (Lamb and Lamb 1993, 217-18). Charles not only cuts the Laertes-Ophelia dialogue precisely because it represents a brother who unwittingly misguides a sister, but he also minimizes any sense of the family's responsibility for Ophelia's tragedy.

### Brothers and Sisters as Study Partners

In *Poetry for Children*, the Lambs' poem "The Brother's Reply" offers a striking reworking of the conventional, hierarchal model of brother-sister education and advisement. If the previous

storyline and poems present a conservative picture of childhood instruction — in which the male sibling is fashioned as an agent of the larger patriarchal family — then "The Brother's Reply" interrogates this model by reconfiguring the brother-sister team as equal partners in study. Recall that in "The Sister's Expostulation on the Brother's Learning Latin," the brother has given up supervising his sister's reading of Shakespeare and Milton, for he has turned his academic attention to Latin. In "The Brother's Reply," however, the same brother responds to his sister's expostulation by dismantling the grounds of his authority. In fact, he goes so far as to align himself with female subordination. During his own tutorial lessons, the brother becomes feminized: he struggles to learn Latin grammar and syntax in a manner similar to his sister's struggle with constructions in English writing: "Know you not each thing we prize / Does from small beginnings rise? / 'Twas the same thing with your writing" ("The Brother's Reply," in Lamb and Lamb 1970, lines 7-9). The brother wrestles with understanding the Latin language just as his sister grapples with Shakespeare's meaning. The brother asserts, "I shall venture in a while / At construction, grammar, style," proceeding to "Sallust, Phaedres, Ovid, Flaccus" (lines 23-28). Even though the brother uses a patronizing tone when addressing his sister, and even though he is granted the opportunity to cultivate competency in the classics, he recognizes his own difficulty with the educational process. Acknowledging his labor and toil with Latin exercises, the brother occupies a subordinate position as pupil and underling. The brother's apprenticeship in Latin as a novice learner parallels the sister's subordination in the study of Shakespeare and Milton.

This sense of shared adversity in the pursuit of educational training is translated, furthermore, into a new brother-sister educational format. As the poem continues, it can be inferred that the brother learns Latin so that he can also school his sister more efficiently in Shakespeare and English poets: "Many words in English are / From the Latin tongue deriv'd, / Of whose sense girls are depriv'd" (Lamb and Lamb 1970, lines 44-45). Implicitly, the brother's duty requires that he gain mastery over Latin to help his sister interpret their national literature with greater proficiency and subtlety. Although this model of tutelage appears hierarchical and authoritative, it soon is transformed into one of symmetry and equivalence. Fearful that his sister will remain angry and hurt by his withdrawal into Latin, the brother posits an equitable solution: "Rather than we will fall out, / (if our parents will agree) / You shall Latin learn with me" (lines 54-56). As Donella Ruwe argues, "the Lambs' poetry reaffirms that girls as well as boys can learn" (Ruwe 1997, 97). Moreover, rather than teaching his sister Latin, the brother emphasizes shared learning, a dialogue.

Because of the strong influence of Rousseau, many Romantic-era educational theorists believed in mutual learning through conversation, rather than a unilateral top-down method. For example, Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to*

*Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1796; Wollstonecraft 1989b) emphasizes the importance of conversation in instruction. She believes that "knowledge should be gradually imparted" (Wollstonecraft 1989b, 359), and thus in her preface she argues that her "conversations are intended to assist the teacher as well as the pupil" (360). Similarly, Anna Laetitia Barbauld writes, "The best way for women to acquire knowledge is from conversation with a father, a brother, or friend, in the way of family intercourse and easy conversation, and by such course of reading they recommend" (Ellis 1874, 1:57). Edgeworth herself writes in the preface to *Early Lessons*: "Much that would be tiresome and insufferable to young people, if offered by preceptors in a didactic tone, will be eagerly suggested in conversation, especially in conversations between themselves" (Edgeworth 1825, vi).

This system of conversational learning, however, is undermined in these educational texts. As Richardson points out concerning Edgeworth's *The Parent's Assistant* (1798; Edgeworth 2003a), "The parent-child conversations in this text are dialogic only in form; the adults remain as resolutely in control of the discursive relation as they would in a formally catechistic situation, and there is similarly no possibility that a truth might arise through dialogue that the parents did not already have in mind" (Richardson 1994, 147). This pattern emerges also in Edgeworth's *Early Lessons*, as well as in Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories*, in which the stern Mrs. Mason is firmly in control of the conversations she has with Mary and Caroline (Edgeworth 1825; Wollstonecraft 1989b). Indeed, as Cornelia Meigs points out, "More than half of the pages of this little book, by actual count, are monologues by Mrs. Mason" (Meigs 1953, 82). Likewise, in her *Conversations Introducing Poetry* (1804), Charlotte Smith "presents the brother and sister pair under the guidance of an authoritative mother" (Ruwe 1997, 90). The theory of mutual instruction, then, breaks down in many popular children's literature texts of the Romantic era.

*Poetry for Children*, by contrast, emphatically endorses the theory of instruction through brother-sister dialogue. Whether or not the parents consent to this irregular tutorial arrangement, the brother at least shows a heterodox sensibility by treating his sister as a peer and fellow student.<sup>6</sup> In this case, collaboration brings a deeper appreciation and comprehension of such esteemed English playwrights as Shakespeare. In *Poetry for Children*, reading Shakespeare provides an apparatus for examining the inner workings of brother-sister education: the movement from a hierarchical relationship into a cooperative experience. Because the brother is often portrayed as an indulgent monitor, his elevated position as teacher has the potential to "reinforce patriarchy" (Ruwe 1997, 89). Yet the sister is not a completely passive pupil, for Shakespeare can be negotiated through cooperation and conversation. *Poetry for Children* goes a step further by indicating that the sister

can even interpret language more figuratively than her brother. In the poem "The Text," for example, it is Eliza who perceives the "spirit" of a sermon, while her brother, William, focuses by rote on the "letter" of the speech: Without impeaching William's merit,

His head but serv'd him for the letter;  
Hers miss'd the words, but kept the spirit;  
Her memory to her heart was debtor. ("The Text," in Lamb and Lamb 1970, lines 57-60)

"The Text" introduces the notion of a sister's active involvement in the text. More than that, the sister feels a heartfelt response to poetics without denigrating her brother's erudition. Thus, in *Poetry for Children*, the family tradition of Shakespearean study becomes a vehicle for discerning the broader intricacies of nineteenth-century co-educational practices: brother-sister education in the Lambs' poems crosses a spectrum that ranges from firm censorship, to mutual conversation, to a sister's greater participation in literature and Shakespeare.

### Notes

1. Richardson argues that "while such writers as Lamb, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey deplore methods of the new approach to education — particularly the dual emphasis on edification and constant, often hidden surveillance — their own writings on childhood are complicit with some of its more disciplinary aspects" (Richardson 1994, 52).
2. On the important influence of rational education in the Romantic era, see Avery 1975, 25-51; Thwaite 1963, especially 63-78; and Meigs 1953, 96-105.
3. On Mary's education through unsupervised reading, see Aaron 1991, 67-68 and Barnett 1976, 18
4. Mylius's book actually includes twenty-five of the total eighty-four poems from the Lambs' *Poetry for Children*, and Godwin in his list of New Books writes that Mylius had collected "the best pieces" (Lamb and Lamb 1970, xv).
5. On the Lambs' "feminization of Shakespeare," see Jean I. Marsden, who examines how "[e]lements of gender were . . . purposely written into the texts of the Lambs' *Tales*" (Marsden 1989, 47).
6. The theme of sibling dependence and interaction presented in the poems appears to draw upon Mary and Charles's relationship, especially after their mother's death. For a comprehensive study of the unique "reciprocity of their sibling bond" (Aaron 1991, 2) and how this leads to an "atypical merging of gender roles" (3), see Aaron's *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writing of Charles and Mary Lamb* (1991).

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