

FATAL WOMEN OF  
ROMANTICISM

ADRIANA CRACIUN



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## CHAPTER I

### *The subject of violence: Mary Lamb, femme fatale*

On 26 September 1796, the *Morning Chronicle* gave the following account of the “fatal catastrophe” that blighted the lives of Mary and Charles Lamb:

On Friday afternoon the Coroner and a respectable Jury sat on the body of a Lady in the neighbourhood of Holborn, who died in consequence of a wound from her daughter the preceding day. It appeared by the evidence adduced, that while the family were preparing for dinner, the young lady seized a case knife laying on the table, and in a menacing manner pursued a little girl, her apprentice, round the room; on the eager calls of her helpless infirm mother to forbear, she renounced her first object, and with loud shrieks approached her parent.

The child by her cries quickly brought up the landlord of the house, but too late – the dreadful scene presented to him the mother lifeless, pierced to the heart, on a chair, her daughter yet wildly standing over her with the fatal knife, and the venerable old man, her father, weeping by her side, himself bleeding at the forehead from the effects of a severe blow he received from one of the forks she had been madly hurling about the room. (*LCML*, 1: 45)

Mary Anne Lamb, the murderer in question, had suffered years of neglect by her mother, and yet, as the newspaper account went on to say, “her carriage towards her mother was ever affectionate in the extreme.” As her mother became incapacitated, the responsibility for her care as well as that of her ill father fell disproportionately on Mary Lamb’s shoulders; this responsibility, combined with her exhausting labors as a mantua-maker and her mother’s coldness towards her, contributed to Lamb’s violent behavior. Lamb was spared incarceration and execution because the inquest determined the cause of the murder was “lunacy”; she remained in her brother Charles’s care until his death, with periodic incarcerations in private asylums during subsequent violent outbursts. Remarkably, after the murder Mary Lamb went on to build a career as an author of popular children’s literature, in such works as her

collection of stories, *Mrs. Leicester's School, or, The History of Several Young Ladies* (1809), her adaptations of *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), and *Poetry for Children* (1809), all of which also included contributions by her brother Charles.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Lamb's career as a writer might not have been possible had she not murdered her mother. This possibility presents an intriguing problem for any gender-complementary model of writing, and of Romantic-period writing in particular, that would align violence and mastery exclusively with masculinity. Gender-complementary models of Romanticism such as Margaret Homans's in *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* and *Bearing the Word*, and Anne Mellor's in *Romanticism and Gender*, differentiate between women's uses of language and men's, and in many respects offer a welcome correction to earlier ungendered (read androcentric) comprehensive models of Romanticism and poetic identity.<sup>2</sup> Yet such gender-complementary models, while valuable for their gender specificity, often reinscribe the rigid gender boundaries which many women and men of the Romantic period defied. Violence, both rhetorical and physical, presents the greatest challenge to such gender-complementary feminist poetics, in part because it seems so clearly attributable to men and masculine interests.

As I suggested in the Introduction, central to feminist literary criticism on nineteenth-century British women writers in general is the unspoken aim to demonstrate that women as a class eschew violence, destructiveness, and cruelty, except in self-defense or rebellion, like Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman in the attic. This strategy is dangerous (all strategies are) because it leaves unquestioned the "repressive hypothesis" of power, in Foucault's famous formulation, and pursues an ideal of the autonomous female "deep subject" outside masculine power and violence, an ideal which is itself power's most productive effect.<sup>3</sup> Gilbert and Gubar's landmark *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) most famously established this reading of nineteenth-century British women writers as engaged in a struggle to release the repressed female self from the grip of male power; *Jane Eyre* is the central text in their reading of repressed female rage and rebellion, as it gives their book its title, and Brontë's novel remains central to much feminist literary criticism of the nineteenth century because it so wonderfully illustrates middle-class women's struggle for intellectual, economic and emotional independence. Michelle Massé has more recently located in *Jane Eyre* woman's triumphant transcendence of the violence central to the "Gothic economy" of patriarchy:

she will not be an accomplice to unjust authority. Jane's testimony as spectator identifies what might overturn the Gothic economy: not eroticizing aggression against one's self and becoming beaten, not repeating the cycle of violence by oppressing others as beater or accomplice, but rather persisting in the search for love *and* independence.<sup>4</sup>

*Jane Eyre* continues to represent liberal feminism's dream of female love and independence outside power and history; yet, as the compelling critiques of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Nancy Armstrong have shown, this traditional reading of *Jane Eyre* fails to examine its own class and cultural interests in its celebration of the autonomous female subject.<sup>5</sup> Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, in the volume *The Violence of Representation* (1989), have argued that in *Jane Eyre* we can trace the shift from the earlier order of spectacular violence, to the modern order of violence as representation, of the repressive hypothesis, where Jane's oppositional discourse of self and other produces the deep female subject at the expense of others, such as Blanche Ingram and Mrs. Reed. "So attached to the novel's heroine," Armstrong and Tennenhouse write, "we neglect to see how her descriptive power becomes a mode of violence in its own right."<sup>6</sup> Jane claims a "position of powerlessness" as her source of authority and authenticity, and as such "[s]he is the progenitrix of a new gender, class, and race of selves in relation to whom all others are deficient" (*Ibid.*, 8). Gender-complementary readings of Romanticism and nineteenth-century women's literature in general celebrate and duplicate Jane's claim of "powerlessness," and attempt to speak from and for this place outside power when they banish violence to the domains of masculinity and the male.

The subject of violence with which I am concerned is not, therefore, the elusive autonomous female subject that erupts in rebellious rage against the repressive constraints of male power, as Gilbert and Gubar's monstrous women do, for example. Mary Lamb's writings certainly are rife with images of repressed violence and rage, and her repeated incarcerations in private asylums following violent outbursts throughout her life make it clear that the repression (and production) of her violence was itself a process of actual, not just rhetorical, violence against her self and body. It is significant, however, that Mary Lamb's rage, murderous rebellion, and legal status as madwoman did not warrant her inclusion in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Mary Lamb's rebellion and rage cannot safely be assimilated in the liberal humanist feminism of Gilbert and Gubar, or in subsequent gender-complementary scholarship, precisely because its violence, lack of provocation, and its female object render its feminist use

value low and its destabilizing potential high.<sup>7</sup> The rage and rebellion of the female subject is welcome as long as its violence is that of representation, as is Jane Eyre's, or is a metaphorical rebellion and self-defense, as is Bertha's. The subject of violence itself remains masculine when it is aggressive (not defensive), physical (not metaphorical), sadistic, and/or sexual. Mary Lamb stabbed her mother without immediate provocation after attacking her female assistant; her violence therefore exceeds the functions of rebellion and rage, and demonstrates the precariousness of women's status as reservoirs of bourgeois benevolence and sympathy, qualities necessary to the new social order's claim to moral progress.

"The subject of violence is always, by definition, masculine," though its object may be either feminine or masculine, because violence is engendered through representation; thus argues Teresa de Lauretis in her important feminist response to Derrida's "The Violence of the Letter."<sup>8</sup> Violence cannot escape gender, or the historical power imbalances between men and women: men are responsible for most violent acts, and the victims of their violence are most often women. De Lauretis's critique of Derrida's dangerous eliding of violence's gendering is persuasive and important; yet what, if anything, can we say of the subject of violence who is also a woman? Must the subject of violence be masculine (even if not male)? I suggest that the answer is no, and that, even while we keep in mind de Lauretis's crucial gendering of violence as masculine, we must continue to examine how Lamb's writings explored the possibilities of a female subject of violence.

Subsequent treatments (or lack thereof) of Lamb's violence reveal the inability and unwillingness of gender-complementary criticism to account for violence when it does not fit the model of female metaphorical rebellion or resistance against male domination. Mary Lamb's violence tends to disappear in new critical work on her writing, or is neatly and quickly dismissed as an effect of "mental illness" (as if this explains anything); such acts of exclusion are themselves acts of rhetorical violence, for they displace violence onto an external, perhaps unnatural, source, instead of acknowledging (feminist) criticism's and women's participation in violence.

In order to demonstrate why Lamb's work invites us to revise our assumptions about women, violence, and language, I will first briefly examine Margaret Homans's influential argument regarding women's violent exclusion from the male symbolic order in *Bearing the Word*. Homans's feminist psychoanalytical readings of nineteenth-century women writers have played a significant part in shaping the gender-complementary



models of women's writing that emerged in the last two decades. For this reason, and because Mary Lamb's "madness" lends itself to psychoanalytical approaches, I want to look at Lamb's writing through this critical lens in order to explore the limitations of this methodology, and the benefits of engaging women's violence more straightforwardly. I argue that women are necessarily subjects both of language and of violence, and that one reason the Lacanian symbolic order is always gendered masculine in such valuable feminist revisions of psychoanalysis as Homans's is precisely in order to distance women from what Derrida termed the "arche-violence" preceding the violence of writing. Just as we cannot "safeguard the exteriority of writing to speech," as Derrida argued in "The Violence of the Letter," so we cannot safeguard the exteriority of violence to women.<sup>9</sup> Focusing on Lamb's first tale from *Mrs. Leicester's School*, "Elizabeth Villiers: The Sailor Uncle," as well as on her poetry, I go on to argue that Mary Lamb's writing demonstrates women's undeniable participation in the violence of the letter as well as in empirical violence. Modern accounts that overlook this violence ironically do violence to Lamb's work, and by extension to Romantic-period women's writing, by imposing onto it a teleological model of the moral progress of female (and feminist) benevolence.

#### MARY LAMB AND THE VIOLENCE OF THE LETTER

Death strolls between letters.

Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book"

Mary Lamb presents an intriguing set of problems for feminist scholarship because she embodies irreconcilable qualities of violence and gentleness, assertiveness and self-effacement, and because these irreconcilable differences she embodies are directly related to writing. To a significant degree, Lamb exemplified the "feminine Romantic" subject as Mellor described it in *Romanticism and Gender*: she did not publish under her own name; she was lauded by her friends for being self-effacing, gentle, reasonable, and domestic; she worked in professions typical for women of her time, being a seamstress and later a private tutor; she wrote almost exclusively for children. Wordsworth's well-known description of Lamb is typical: "the meek, / The self-restraining, and the ever-kind."<sup>10</sup> And yet these "feminine" qualities represent only one dimension of Mary Lamb's life and writing, as they represent only one dimension of women's

participation in Romanticism. For Lamb was also capable of murderous violence and rage, not only in her actions but also in her writing. It may seem odd for me to order the previous sentence as I did, implying that the greater concern we may have is not with one violent incident when she murdered her mother, but the violence which remained a part of her and her work long after the deed was done. But it is precisely the “violence of the letter,” as Derrida termed it, that interests me here, because the violence of the murder is typically and unsatisfactorily explained away as a result of “mental illness,” often anachronistically and retroactively diagnosed as manic depressive disorder. I want therefore to focus a consciously feminist inquiry specifically on the Romantic-period woman subject and author, in this case Mary Lamb, in order to question the limits we ourselves place on female subjectivity and authorship, and to reintroduce the transgressive potential of typically “masculine” actions and desires that many Romantic-period women in fact exercised.

Jane Aaron, in *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb*, writes of how difficult it was for Lamb to incorporate her violence into her concept of self, and how throughout her life she distanced her “sane” feminine self from her aggressive “insane” self (126); Charles Lamb likewise could not reconcile Mary’s gender with her behavior, and as Aaron writes,

appears to have seen the deed as having been committed by a dominant masculine madness, satanic or divine, which had taken possession of his sister . . . Nurturative female values, embodied very consistently from all contemporary accounts by Mary during her periods of sanity, are thus seen as endangered by aggressive masculine drives.<sup>11</sup>

Mary’s violence was so disturbing in a woman that it needed to be displaced onto an inhuman and unfemale source. Her recurring bouts of madness and rage were thus experienced by her brother as possession by masculinity, and she was repeatedly removed from their home to the care of professionals during such periods.

Yet we must be careful not to duplicate this gesture of suppression in our reevaluation of women’s position as Romantic subjects and authors. To reduce women such as Lamb to “male-identified,” masculinist, or “mentally ill” subjects would be to rely on and reinscribe a circular argument that attributes violence and mastery solely to masculinity. The subject of violence has the power to destabilize such concepts of complementary female subjectivity both in the Romantic period and in our

own. Thus, rather than emphasize the virtues of women's exclusion from power and the masculinist symbolic order, I am interested in the feminist possibilities of what I would argue is women's undeniable participation in a symbolic and political order that is admittedly grounded in violence.

In *Bearing the Word*, Margaret Homans, drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow, locates the origin of the Lacanian symbolic order in the murder and subsequent idealization of the mother by the poet/son:

The symbolic order is founded, not merely on the regrettable loss of the mother, but rather on her active and overt murder. Thus a feminist critique begins by indicating the situation in which women are placed by a myth of language that assumes the speaker to be masculine. (11)

Women are indeed placed in the position of object, listener, or amanuensis of male language; yet I would argue that feminist revisions of Lacanian psychoanalysis highlight and critique this positioning of women as object in part due to the originating violence of the symbolic order, and their desire to deny women as subject of this violence. Mary Lamb's murder of her mother is in fact inseparable from her position as author, and this association between writing and death is a prevalent theme in her works. Thus in this feminist critique, I begin, like Homans, by indicating that in Mary Lamb's myth of language the object of violence and language is indeed female, but, as we shall see, so is the subject.

The most striking connection between women as subject of violence and of writing in Mary Lamb's work occurs in the first story from *Mrs. Leicester's School*, "Elizabeth Villiers: The Sailor Uncle." *Mrs. Leicester's School*, published anonymously in 1809, contains a series of narratives in which young girls tell their life stories to their fellow inmates at a boarding school. Elizabeth Villiers, the heroine of the first tale, tells of learning to read at her mother's grave (see Figure 1):

The first thing I can remember was my father teaching me the alphabet from the letters on a tombstone that stood at the head of my mother's grave. I used to tap at my father's study door; I think now I hear him say, "Who is there? – What do you want, little girl? "Go and see mamma. Go and learn pretty letters." Many times in the day would my father lay aside his books and his papers to lead me to this spot, and make me point to the letters, and then set me to spell syllables and words: in this matter, the epitaph on my mother's tomb being my primer and my spelling-book, I learned to read. (*WCML*, 111: 276)

The father not only authorizes but also encourages the girl to read of her mother's death, literally to read her death sentence, thus reiterating

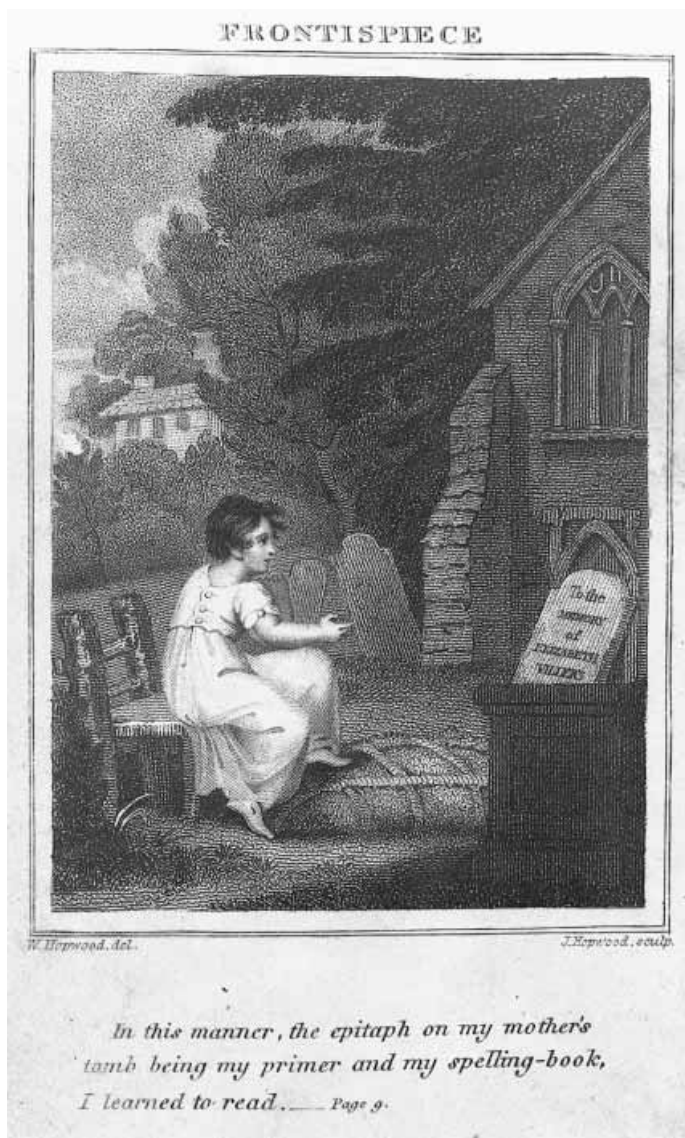


Figure 1 Frontispiece to Mary and Charles Lamb's *Mrs. Leicester's School* (1809); the inscription quotes from Mary Lamb's tale, "Elizabeth Villiers: Or the Sailor Uncle." Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, UCLA Library.

her absence and exclusion. Because the girl and the mother share the same name, Elizabeth Villiers, the girl is in fact reiterating her own death. She is initiated into the symbolic order by putting into practice the violent exclusion of the lost referent (the mother, or the female). Thus, Elizabeth's coming to writing is in many respects an ideal example of Homans's persuasive critique of the symbolic order and its sacrifice of the female.

Yet what is curious about this opening scene of instruction is that the subject who is initiated is female. The previous psychoanalytical reading might deny the girl agency in the Lacanian symbolic order because she was instructed by the father to read of the death of her mother, suggesting that the symbolic is ordered by the Law of the Father; and the girl is also absolved of any blame for the mother's death, the violence which sets in motion this order, for this same reason. But we could instead say that one is only authorized as a subject within a system of power that precedes one's existence. Likewise, the subject of language is not an autonomous agent outside that language, but only emerges as a possibility within it. Thus the construction of Elizabeth as female subject of discourse and action is, I would argue, neither the product of a proper external agent (the father, or "power"), nor is it a freely chosen action of the pre-existing self (one who teaches herself to read in a gesture of self-empowerment and self-creation). As Judith Butler explains, the construction of a subject

is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both "subjects" and "acts" come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterating acting that is power in its persistence and instability. (*Bodies*, 9)

Thus, we see Elizabeth instructed to read by the father, and yet, when her uncle asked who taught her to read, she answers:

"Mamma," . . . for I had an idea that the words on the tombstone were somehow a part of mamma, and that she had taught me. "And who is mamma," asked my uncle. "Elizabeth Villiers," I replied . . . (*WCML*, III: 276)

The origin of Elizabeth's language is thus not unmediated Nature, nor the authority of the Father, but the repetition of signs. "Elizabeth Villiers" names both mother and daughter of language, the simultaneously self-authorizing and externally authorized female subject.

Derrida, in *Writing and Difference*, articulates the model of language as absence of which Mary Lamb's text is an "ideal" example:

The first book . . . the eve prior to all repetition, has lived on the deception that the center was sheltered from play: the irreplaceable . . . a kind of *invariable first name* that could be invoked but not repeated. The center of the first book should not have been repeatable in its own representation. Once it lends itself a single time to such a representation – that is to say, once it is written – when one can read a book in the book, an origin in the origin . . . it is the abyss, it is the bottomlessness of infinite redoubling. (296)

The repetition of this invariable first name, Elizabeth Villiers, in Lamb's text effectively replaces the center of original presence, which some theorists claim for women's language, with the abyss of endless deferral. Both mother and daughter in the text, "Elizabeth" was also mother and daughter in Lamb's life, being the name of her murdered mother, as well as of two dead sisters. The death of the first "Elizabeth" predated Lamb's own birth, her origin, so that her own act of murdering "Elizabeth" is not, literally speaking, original: it repeats an act of exclusion, and returns as an echo of an earlier lost "Elizabeth."

Far from being an unmediated female presence, for Elizabeth Villiers's nature is mediated by language, and both are imbued with death: "the words on the tombstone were somehow a part of mamma." When reflecting on her image of her mamma, the young Elizabeth evokes the pleasure she gains from nature's presence, yet this living, green presence is within the grave:

I used to wish I was sleeping in the grave with papa and mamma; and in my childish dreams I used to fancy myself there; and it was a place within the ground, all smooth, and soft and green. I never made out any figure of mamma, but still it was the tombstone, and papa, and the smooth green grass. (*WCML*, III: 277)

Life and death are here indistinguishable; nature becomes the impossible living green space within the grave, and her living father and dead mother share this liminal state. The child cannot experience mother or nature as presence; rather, the maternal is dispersed throughout her world, and is experienced through signs (a place within the ground, the tombstone, the grass).

Percy Bysshe Shelley's account of the poet's desire for mother nature in *Alastor* bears a striking resemblance to Mary Lamb's, and yet it is precisely Shelley's exclusion and idealization of the mother that Homans, quite rightly I think, uses to exemplify the violence of the dominant Western myth of language:

Mother of this unfathomable world!  
 Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
 Thee ever, and thee only; [. . . ] I have made my bed  
 In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
 Keeps record of the trophies won from thee.

(*Poetical Works*, 33)

Homans writes that Shelley's hero's ideal female figure in the above quotation "is a figurative substitute for a mother that has been killed . . . in order to set the poem's chain of signifiers in motion"; "the narrator . . . makes it clear that it is her association with death – and therefore I would suggest her death itself – that motivates and makes possible his song" (*Bearing the Word*, 10). But we must acknowledge that Mary Lamb's "song" in *Mrs. Leicester's School* is also set in motion by her own murder of her mother Elizabeth, and is repeated in the motherlessness of her female characters.<sup>12</sup>

Jean Marsden has recently also argued that in Lamb's works "learning to read via the mother becomes a complex nexus of death, education, and loss that each child presents as the defining moment of her life."<sup>13</sup> Lamb's allegories "suggest a traumatic induction into a Lacanian symbolic order,"<sup>14</sup> as I have argued, yet it is crucial to insist on the writer's (always limited) agency in this "death" and "loss" at the heart of her language. The mother is not merely lost, she is killed, much as Virginia Woolf argued that women must kill the angel in the house in order to write. If we celebrate Woolf's feminist rage, must we not also, at the very least, accept Mary Lamb's violence, instead of attempting to exorcise it?

The poem "Memory" from Mary and Charles Lamb's *Poetry for Children* (1809) (Mary's authorship of which is uncertain, as will be discussed shortly) celebrates this power of language over nature and history. A "young forgetful" girl desires heightened Memory, and would "travel for her through the earth"; "a female figure came to her," writes Lamb, and advised her:

The only substitute for me  
 Was ever found, is call'd a pen;  
 The frequent use of that will be  
 The way to make me come again.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Lamb understood language's radical separation from nature, and valued it precisely for this reason, since it allowed her to rewrite her own history, and her memory of her mother.<sup>16</sup> Both Aaron and Leslie

Friedman examine in great detail the striking correspondences between the deprivations of Lamb's female characters and of her own life; Friedman notes in particular that the efficient manner in which "unwanted family members can be whisked out of sight in her stories" is characteristic of Lamb's use of writing as mastery: "The power of words and wishes is great, and believing in that power, Mary is able to enact bloodless aggression in the stories" (11: 441). Anne Mellor cites the possibility that "the masculine mind can receive pleasure from the silencing of the female" as one of the most troubling characteristics of masculine Romanticism (*RG*, 19); yet Mary Lamb seems to have derived a similar pleasure from the power of writing as aggression. Mellor herself warns that to assume that "male Romantic writers constructed one kind of self and female Romantic writers another" is to oversimplify and essentialize (*RG*, 168). However, gender-complementary models still associate masculinity with violence and mastery through selective readings, and, I would argue, because the consolations of female pacifism and benevolence are still appealing and therefore are reinscribed. Contrasting Dorothy Wordsworth's building of "refuges" through language with the dominant model of language as violent exclusion of the referent (and the female), as Margaret Homans does, is important, but equally important is questioning why the subject of language's violence is *necessarily* masculine.

Like her female characters who were "unhappy, angry and quarrelsome,"<sup>17</sup> Mary Lamb was far from being a meek and self-effacing woman. Her essay "On Needlework" (1815), a powerful protest against the destructive effects of women's unpaid labor on their intellect and status, is signed "Sempronia," which I believe refers to the classical Sempronia, best known through the Latin historian Sallust, whom the Lambs mentioned by name in another poem.<sup>18</sup> Sallust's Sempronia participated in the Catilinarian conspiracy, and he described her as "a woman who had committed many crimes that showed her to have the reckless daring of a man"; however, he said, despite her sexual promiscuity and recklessness, "her abilities were not to be despised. She could write poetry, crack a joke, and converse at will with decorum, tender feeling, or wantonness; she was in fact a woman of ready wit and considerable charm."<sup>19</sup> Mary Lamb's decision to name herself after such a controversial female figure, especially one known for criminal activity and radical politics, reveals a degree of defiance and assertiveness on her part that did not end with her act of murder.



## POETRY FOR CHILDREN

The authorship of the individual poems in Mary and Charles Lamb's *Poetry for Children*, published in 1809 "by the author of Mrs. Leicester's School," remains largely inconclusive and unreliable. We know from Charles Lamb's letters that Mary wrote two-thirds of the 73 poems, yet, because the book was published anonymously, only the authorship of a few of the poems (which were later published elsewhere or claimed in letters) is clear. I want briefly to examine the authorship dispute, which I believe unresolvable given current knowledge, because I will be discussing several poems whose authorship is in dispute, and also, and more interestingly, because the editorial criteria used for attributing authorship is uneasily influenced by Mary's violence. Thus not only is Mary Lamb's critical reception as a Romantic-period poet in significant part determined by our reactions to her violence, but so, to a certain extent, is the very body of her work bound up in and circumscribed by this violence.

Lucas's authoritative edition of the works of Charles and Mary Lamb, published in 1903, supplants earlier editions of their work, such as H. Carew Hazlitt's, and offers different, and speculative, attributions. In his notes to *Poetry for Children*, Lucas writes that:

I have placed against the poems . . . the authorship – brother's or sister's – which seems to me the more probable. But I hope it will be understood that I do this at a venture, and, except in a few cases, with no exact knowledge. (*WCML*, 111: 491)

Of the 73 poems, Lucas attributes definitive authorship to only 6; for the remaining poems, he offers conjectural arguments for authorship for a few, but for the majority of the poems we are given a suggested author with no support. We must be wary of accepting these attributions as "most probable," however, not because Lucas may be wrong (because he may very well be right), but because I think his criteria are necessarily informed by a desire to account for and exorcise Mary's violence from the poetry (just as mine would, possibly, be informed by an opposed desire).

More recently, Cyril Hussey suggested a method for assigning authorship based on textual scholarship, internal evidence (Mary's "faulty rhymes"), and, most importantly for my purposes, "the gentle morality one associates with Mary Lamb."<sup>20</sup> Hussey thus articulated the central, unspoken dilemma of most Mary Lamb scholarship – how best to redeem her gentleness in the face of her violence. For example, Hussey clinches

Mary's authorship of "A Birthday Wish" by finally comparing "the nature of the poem itself" (4) (i.e., peaceful) to the nature of Mary Lamb:

It could be argued that having been through the terrible period of mania when she killed her mother, then the prayer of gratitude to God which the poem embodies, could not have been written by the same person. This does not take into account the gentle and trusting nature of Mary Lamb. (4)

Hussey then goes on to quote at length Gilchrist's account of the murder, and here, significantly, Hussey makes the same move as do virtually all who write on Mary Lamb.

Gilchrist's account in *Mary Lamb*, like the account in the *Morning Chronicle* on which it is based, downplays Mary's agency as murderer not just by repeatedly emphasizing her "frenzy," "insanity," or "nervous misery," but by eliding the scene of violence itself:

seized with a sudden attack of frenzy, she snatched a knife from the table and pursued the young apprentice round the room, and when her mother interposing, received a fatal stab and died instantly. Mary was totally unconscious [*sic*] of what she had done.<sup>21</sup>

It is Mary who is "seized" by madness, and her mother who interposes and receives a fatal stab – Mary the murderer is nowhere to be found, so that we as readers, perhaps because we desire to, remain as unconscious as Mary is said to have been.

I find it surprising, and disturbing, that virtually all work on Mary Lamb repeats this same violent exclusion of Mary's violence by relying on the accounts of Charles Lamb and the *Morning Chronicle* unquestioningly, to the point of echoing their language and certainly their (sympathetic) refusal to hold Mary responsible for her actions. The *Morning Chronicle* report quoted at the beginning of this chapter offers us only the "menacing" Mary Lamb who "approaches" her parent, and the post-murder discovery: "the dreadful scene presented to him [the landlord] the mother lifeless, pierced to the heart, on a chair, her daughter yet wildly standing over her with the fatal knife." As if inducing in us Mary's unconsciousness, this oft-repeated account reinforces woman's violence as impossible and unrepresentable by violently excising it – simultaneously, of course, making this same violence central.

Charles's letter to Samuel T. Coleridge five days after the murder provides the second oft-repeated strategy of dealing with it: "My poor dear dearest sister in a fit of insanity has been the death of her own mother" (*LCML*, 1: 44). Jane Aaron's excellent study of the Lambs, even while it goes into great depth examining the complex political, social, and

personal forces Mary Lamb had to contend with, still echoes Charles's words and their gesture of displacement, abstracting Mary's act of murder to a bringing about of death: "Mary Lamb, in a sudden outbreak of violent mania, brought about the death of her mother" (*Double Singleness*, 97). Pamela Woof's diction in her article on Lamb and Dorothy Wordsworth transforms the murder into an even more ambiguous affair: "If through some notion of saving Mary pain, her friends never mentioned the catastrophe of her mother's murder" (part 1, 50). If one did not already know otherwise, one might imagine from this sentence that someone else had murdered Elizabeth Lamb, not her daughter. Gilchrist's, Ross's, Ashton's, and Davies's studies of Mary Lamb, as well as recent articles such as Marsden's, similarly cushion the impact of her violence by inserting mental illness, insanity, madness as the true agent of the deed.<sup>22</sup> I am not arguing that Lamb's violence was an indication of her "free will," her intentional and transgressive agency as an "autonomous" subject. But neither can I accept modern diagnoses that emphasize her lack of responsibility (the most popular being bipolar or manic depressive disorder), for they represent our current medical and often anesthetizing approach to such disturbing behavior, and in my opinion cannot be offered (as they now are) as helpful explanations; like the explanations of possession, or unreason, or of moral failure, they reveal little about Mary Lamb, and much about the current dominant construction of "mental illness" and its ideological interests.

Certainly such sidestepping and medicalization of Mary Lamb's violence is done today, as it was in her lifetime, "through some notion of saving Mary pain."<sup>23</sup> I have great respect for this sympathetic intention, and my insistence on attending to Lamb's violence is not motivated by a contrasting desire to cause pain. I want to insist that our accounts of this writer accept the violence in her life and writing because her physical, matricidal violence is the most shocking example not of one woman's illness and unconscious actions, but of all women's complex involvement in political, linguistic, and cultural systems that rely on violence. It is precisely because our accounts of Mary's "illness" mirror (with updated diagnoses) those of two hundred years ago so closely (of a possessing, masculine demonic madness, as Charles saw it) that we need to be suspicious of them. Why, we need to ask, is women's violence so dangerous to us? What is so worth preserving that one woman's violence more than two hundred years ago must be expelled from our writings and hers? The answer I want to suggest to these questions is the "woman writer": across race, class, and historical and cultural lines the woman

writer shares an ideal prepatriarchal, nurturing, benevolent nonviolent human potential, culturally designated as feminine, which her unjustifiable violence would destroy, or so many accounts of nineteenth-century British women's literature suggest. In our historical moment, as we reexamine Romantic poetics and their complex indebtedness to misogynist practices, the desire to establish a complementary Romanticism, or a female Gothic, seems widespread and sincere, and is in many respects a valuable feminist project. Even today, however, Mary Lamb remains a danger to expectations of a complementary feminine subject, and for this reason all accounts of her murder repeat almost verbatim either the newspaper or Charles's account, interposing a dismissive mental derangement between Mary Lamb and her violence, or obliterating the violence altogether.

Yet Mary Lamb's violence remained a part of her writing, as violence remains a necessary part of all symbolic systems. Jane Aaron among others, has nicely demonstrated how Mary's painful, excessive self-restraint was but an extreme version of the self-restraint expected of all proper women of her time. In Mary Lamb's oft-quoted letter to Sarah Stoddart in 1805, for example, she admonishes herself for the trace of anger in a previous letter:

I wrote under a forcible impulse which I could not at that time resist, but I have fretted so much about it since, that I think it is the last time I will ever let my pen run away with me. (*LCML*, 11: 186)

This is one of many incidents in Lamb's letters where she shrinks from expressing any anger or protest, as Aaron and others have noted; yet it is more than a retraction of her anger. Lamb specifically admonishes herself for being overcome by a "forcible impulse" and expressing anger in a specific way – *while writing*. Her pen runs away with her much like the "fatal knife" had run away with her in 1796, leaving Lamb at once the victim of a demonic power (either of "mental illness," or of language), and a dangerously aggressive writer *and* murderer, who recognizes the dangerous affinity between pen and knife. We cannot separate the writer of children's verse from the murderer, precisely because Mary Lamb tried to do just that for fifty years, and, as in the above letter, found that she could not.

I turn now to several poems from the Lambs's *Poetry for Children* (1809), the definitive authorship of which remains in dispute. It is important to note that, although it is generally assumed that the poets' identities remained unknown for some time, some of the Lambs' contemporaries considered Mary Lamb as the sole author of the poems; the reviewer for

*The Monthly Review*, for example, made the following startling comment: “We hear that [the poems] are the production of Miss Lambe [*sic*], whose brother published ‘Tales from Shakespeare,’ and we think that this lady will be entitled to the gratitude of every mother whose children obtain her compositions.”<sup>24</sup> The most interesting of the poems in my opinion is “The Beasts in the Tower,” which Hazlitt attributed to Mary and Lucas to Charles.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of authorship, this poem clearly engages with the problem of Mary’s violence through an allegory of ferocious beasts caged in a tower menagerie (perhaps the Tower of London, which served as a menagerie for such beasts for centuries). In the poem, the narrator warns a young boy about life’s destructive forces; the ferocious beasts are described in detail, focusing on their power and beauty while emphasizing their strict confinement: “Within the precincts of this yard, / Each [is] in his narrow confines barr’d” (*WCML*, III: 407). The panther in particular exemplifies the beasts in their deadly beauty: “the fairest beast / . . . He underneath a fair outside / Does cruelty and treach’ry hide” (*WCML*, III: 408). The narrator details the killing methods of each beast, warning the child that though the tiger “with ease / upon the tallest man could seize . . . and into a thousand pieces tear him,” not the smallest infant need fear, for the beast is “cabin’d so securely here.” Yet the narrator’s sympathy is with the caged beasts: deprived of their “wild haunts” and placed in servitude, “Enslaved by man, they suffer here!” (*WCML*, III: 407).

The precarious nature of the beasts’ confinement is emphasized throughout, and on one level is clearly symbolic of the confinement of women to domestic spaces where rage is restrained beneath beauty, yet also exacerbated because of its repression: “Yet here within appointed lines / How small a grate his rage confines!” (*WCML*, III: 409) Women’s diminutive or fair outside, the poem suggests, can never wholly contain rage and violence. Lamb’s own periodic breakdowns attest that the “unrelenting restraint”<sup>26</sup> she imposed upon herself was only temporary. The poem’s closing moral echoes the Lambs’s rationalization of their mother’s murder as providential:

This place, me thinks, resembleth well  
The world itself in which we dwell.  
Perils and snares on every ground,  
Like these wild beasts, beset us round.  
But Providence their rage restrains,  
Our heavenly Keeper sets them chains;  
His goodness saveth every hour  
His darlings from the lion’s power.

(*WCML*, III: 409)

Both Mary and Charles (and subsequent scholars) absolved Mary of responsibility for the murder, Charles writing to Coleridge that Mary was “the unhappy and unconscious instrument of the Almighty’s judgments on our house.”<sup>27</sup> A few days after the murder, Mary was “calm and serene,” says Charles, and she herself wrote from the asylum where she was confined that “I have no fear. The spirit of my mother seems to descend and smile upon me, and bid me to live and enjoy the life and reason which the Almighty has given me. I shall see her again in heaven.”<sup>28</sup> If Providence and its chains alone restrain destructive violence, as Lamb’s poem states, then its release is also divinely ordained.

When her murder was attributed to “lunacy” and she was spared execution or incarceration, Mary Lamb effectively surrendered the right to her own rage and violence by placing them in divine hands. She likewise surrendered her public position as author by not publishing under her own name because this name was notorious.<sup>29</sup> And yet her crime was liberatory in two senses – it freed her from the excessive burden of caring for her sick mother (who appears to have been both cruel and neglectful), and marked the beginning of her career as writer, since as far as we know she did not write before the murder. Her dual positions as author of the deed of murder, and author of texts, are thus inextricably bound. Unlike Foucault’s Pierre Rivière, who, later in the century, gained notoriety as author both of a murder and of its narrative, Mary Lamb withdrew from public literary attention precisely because her murder in 1796 did not fit into a “historical field” of murder/narratives by women.<sup>30</sup> However, this rage and violence remained a part of her work and life, and, to an important extent, her position as murderer made possible her position as author, despite the fact that publicly she wanted to claim neither position.

MARY LAMB, FEMME FATALE

High-born Helen, round your dwelling  
 These twenty years I’ve paced in vain:  
 Haughty beauty, thy lover’s duty  
 Hath been to glory in his pain.

Mary Lamb, “Helen”

We do have one context in which her position as subject of violence would not be anomalous – the French Revolution and its accounts and allegories of women’s aggression. This revolutionary context for Lamb’s violence is suggested by Fuseli’s sketch of a bacchante, inscribed “Mary Anne” and

“Maria [illegible] 179[–]” by an unknown hand and generally thought to refer to Mary Anne Lamb (Figure 2). Lamb’s murder on 22 September 1796 occurred in a context of great English anxiety about revolutionary changes in France and at home. The women’s march on Versailles during the October Days of 1789, and other acts of violence committed by women such as Charlotte Corday throughout the Revolution, shocked the British no matter what their political inclinations were, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. Following the Terror in France and its accompanying images of female violence which remain with us to this day, Lamb murdered her mother one day after the fourth anniversary of the Republic.<sup>31</sup>

As Madelyn Gutwirth has shown in *Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era*, the image of woman as deadly maenad or bacchante came to represent, with ultimately deleterious effects for women, the destructive potential unleashed by the Revolution as a whole. Yet all such persuasive accounts of female allegory in the French Revolution examine largely the works or representations of men, and we have much work to do in recovering women’s own uses of such images. Even the male-authored allegories of women as bacchantes or Liberty served as dangerous examples of real female militancy, as Gutwirth, Lynn Hunt, and others have shown, and, for this reason, were replaced by male allegorical figures such as Hercules. We should not, therefore, accept too easily as stable such allegories of women’s violence as misogynist. Instead, as Donna Landry has recently argued regarding the revolutionary Amazon, we must continue to analyze the complex functions of “the Amazon spectrally haunting the figure of the domestic woman” so that we may read “against the grain of much late-eighteenth-century English discourse on womanhood and of many current Anglo-U.S. academic accounts of that discourse.”<sup>32</sup>

Reading against the grain, then, I would argue that Henry Fuseli’s portrait of a bacchante inscribed “Mary Anne” and “Maria [illegible] 179[–]”<sup>33</sup> is a rare celebration and elevation of Mary Lamb’s aggression into political allegory. Philip Martin, in *Mad Women in Romantic Writing*, cites this sketch as an unusual “breach of Romantic decorum” because it portrays the mad woman, Mary Lamb, not as a casualty, but as dangerous (ix). Shown wielding a knife and bedecked with a headdress of grapes to signify her allegiance to Dionysus, god of wine and excess, the woman smiles menacingly at us, holding the leg of what may be a sacrificial lamb or buck, and a knife, Lamb’s murder weapon. Like the tiger in “The Beasts in the Tower” who could “into a thousand pieces tear” any



Figure 2 Henry Fuseli, “Woman with a Stiletto, Man’s Head with a Startled Expression” (1810–1820). This drawing bears three inscriptions by an unknown contemporary hand, two along the upper edge: “Mary Anne” and “Maria[illegible] 179[?]”; the third, “Fuseli,” can be seen beneath the man’s head. The word after “Maria” appears either smudged or erased; the “179” is a date, though the final digit has been cut off by the edge of the paper. These inscriptions and the incomplete date (possibly 1796, the year in which Lamb murdered her mother) are generally thought to refer to Mary Anne Lamb. Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.