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Charles Lamb's religion, 'if they can find out what it is'

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Charles Lamb died on 27 December 1834. In the year following his death, *The Monthly Repository*, a periodical strongly inflected by the Unitarian ministry of its founder in 1806, Robert Aspland, published a number of tributes to Lamb, each of which in its way remembers or reconstructs Lamb's religion, and perhaps subtly seeks to align it with the larger concerns of dissent.¹

Together these posthumous remembrances witness an ambiguity in and about Lamb's religion that he in good measure cultivated during his lifetime, even as they reactivate what Felicity James has called the 'Unitarian allegiances' of his early writing.² The anonymous recollection, signed 'S.Y.', of 'An Evening with Charles Lamb and Coleridge', published early in 1835, remembers the two friends in old age and Coleridge's smiling 'very quietly' when, after a sceptical silence and a pause, Lamb

¹ On the periodical, see Francis E. Mineka, *The Dissidence of Dissent: The Monthly Repository, 1806-1825* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944) and Duncan Wu, 'The Lamb Circle and *The Monthly Repository*', 12 (2006), 143-49; Anne F. Janowitz has recently called *The Monthly Repository* 'the central periodical of the Unitarian intelligentsia' ('The Aikin family, retrospectively' in Felicity James and Ian Inkster, eds, *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle, 1740-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.205-229 (at p.207)).

² Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.3; see also pp.32-4.

said suddenly, ‘One of the things that made me question the particular inspiration they ascribed to Jesus Christ, was his ignorance of the character of Judas Iscariot. Why did not he and his disciples kick him out for a rascal, instead of receiving him as a disciple?’³

This Lamb, prompting serious thought even as his unserious manner promotes humour, is remembered, too, and more fully described, in a second anonymous recollection appended to a short review of a collection of Lamb’s miscellaneous works, containing *Rosamund Gray* and ‘Recollections of Christ’s Hospital’ alongside other texts, reprinted by Edward Moxon.⁴ To the descriptive praise of the volume, the reviewer writes, ‘We take this opportunity of introducing the following few but valuable sentences, minuted down from the lips of the late S.T. Coleridge’.⁵ The full note, itself only a short paragraph, has been well known to Lamb scholars since E.V. Lucas reprinted it in the second volume of his *Life* (1905), but its importance in pointing up the connections between Lamb’s religious beliefs and his literary reading has not before been recognised.⁶

In the ‘*Character of Charles Lamb, by Coleridge*’, ‘minuted down’ from his lips, then, Lamb is remembered by Coleridge precisely for his capacity to shock:

The wild words that come from him sometimes on religious subjects would shock you from the mouth of any other man, but from him they seem mere flashes of firework. If an argument seem to his reason not fully true, he bursts out in that odd desecrating way: yet his will, the inward man, is, I well know, profoundly religious. Watch him when

³ *The Monthly Repository*, n.s. 9 (1835), 162-68 (at p.166).

⁴ Charles Lamb, *Rosamund Gray* (London: Edward Moxon, 1835)

⁵ *The Monthly Repository*, n.s. 9 (1835), 626-27 (at p.627), correcting ‘inmuted’ in the original as a presumed minim-error on the authority of OED, *minute* v1a, which records the phrase ‘minuted down’ from 1836.

⁶ E.V. Lucas, *The Life of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1905), 2.268.

alone, and you will find him with either a Bible or an old divine, or an old English poet; in such is his pleasure.⁷

Despite the efforts of Francis Jackson later in the century to provide a Bible for Lamb among his (fraudulent) 'Relics of Charles Lamb', adding his spurious bookplate to a Wesleyan New Testament that for the moment creates the unlikeliness of a Methodist Lamb, we still know little today about his theological reading.⁸ But Lamb's reading in what we would now call early modern poetry, and particularly early modern drama, is much better understood, and show how sharp Coleridge's observation was. In a famous letter to John Chambers of May or June 1817, known only now in a later transcription, Lamb again set out to shock.⁹ Writing of a mutual acquaintance, George Friend, he told Chambers:

Friend is married; he has married a Roman Catholic, which has offended his family, but they have come to an agreement, that the boys (if they have children) shall be bred up in the father's religion, and the girls in the mother's, which I think equitable enough.... I am determined my children shall be brought up in their father's religion, if they can find out what it is.¹⁰

⁷ *The Monthly Repository*, n.s. 9 (1835), 626-27 (at p.627); Lucas's transcription introduces a comma between 'a Bible, or an old divine', imbalancing Coleridge's apposition.

⁸ *The New Testament, with Explanatory notes by John Wesley* (London: the Proprietors, 1817), now Cambridge University Library, BSS 201.E17.21; on Jackson see Barbara Rosenbaum, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts, Volume 4: 1800-1900, Part II, Hardy-Lamb* (London: Mansell, 1990), p.666

⁹ The letter was first published in William Carew Hazlitt, ed., *Letters of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: Bell, 1886), 2.42, and shortly afterwards in Alfred Ainger, ed., *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1888), 2.17-20, on whose text subsequent editions rely.

¹⁰ Edwin W. Marris, ed., *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 3 vols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975-), 3.247; ellipses in original.

The fine final clause of Lamb's last sentence has not been annotated by his editors, but when Lamb's letters are next edited it could be.

For Lamb's joke remembers an exchange from John Marston's play, *The Malcontent* (1604), two quotations from which, amounting to 14 and 11 lines, Lamb gives in his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived About the Time of Shakspeare* (1808).¹¹ The three early quarto printings of Marston's play are bibliographically complicated, but the copy probably used by Lamb – one of the playbooks left to the British Museum by David Garrick – is an exemplum of STC 17481, the third edition printed in 1604, with Webster's 'Additions'.¹² In an exchange between Malevole, the play's disguised hero, and Bilioso, 'An olde cholerike Marshall', Bilioso reports, 'I heare Duke *Pietro* is dead':

Mal. I, and Mendoza is Duke, what will you do?

Bilioso Is Mendoza strongest?

Mal. Yet he is.

Bilioso Then yet Ile holde with him.

Mal. But if that *Altofront* should turne strait againe?

Bilioso Why then I would turne strait againe.

Tis good runne still with him that haz most might:

I had rather stand with wrong, than fall with right.

Mal. What religion wil you be of now?

¹¹ Charles Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived About the Time of Shakspeare* (London: Longman and others, 1808), p.79.

¹² On versions of *The Malcontent*, see Charles Cathcart, 'Marston, *The Malcontent*, and The King's Men', *Review of English Studies*, 57 (2006), 43-63; and on the copy used by Lamb, see George M. Kahrl and Dorothy Anderson, *The Garrick Collection of Old English Plays: A Catalogue with an Historical Introduction* (London: The British Library, 1982), item 725; the playbook is now British Library, C.34.e.17.

Bili. Of the Dukes religion, when I know what it is.¹³

It would not have needed Malevole's flashing response – 'O*Hercules!*' – to fix this last exchange in Lamb's ear and in his mind: 'in such,' as Coleridge noted, 'is his pleasure'; and in such a quiet parallelism of phrasing did his self-deprecation take shape. The 'inward' Lamb that Coleridge remembered is here of a piece with his allusiveness, and his delight in adopting personae in conversation, in correspondence and in his writings, that turn and turn again. If Lamb's religion continues to be a puzzle, then in his use of Marston, at least, we can be certain 'what it is', and where this part of its expression came from.

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¹³ John Marston, *The Malcontent* (London: V.S. for William Aspley, 1604), sig. G3v.