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A ‘touch of Tombatism’: Mary Lamb, Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens, and Reading in Graveyards

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Abstract: This essay is about the significance of Mary Lamb’s portrayal of a child reading from a gravestone in the short story ‘Elizabeth Villiers; or The Sailor Uncle’ from *Mrs. Leicester’s School* (1809). Possibly the most famous tomb-reading scene in literature is that of Pip divining the personalities of his immediate family from their gravestone at the opening of *Great Expectations*. However, a similar scene had been used previously by Mary Shelley in *Falkner* (1837) and earlier still by Mary Lamb in ‘The Sailor Uncle’. My argument is that Mary Lamb’s text continues to have a hidden, posthumous existence as Mary Shelley and Charles Dickens went on to translate that image of a child reading from their parent’s gravestone. Each author also records a practice used by poor children to gain an education. Furthermore, the grave acts as a

childhood home where dead parents continue to educate their children. (148 words)

Keywords: Charles Dickens; Mary Lamb; Charles Lamb; Mary Shelley; *Mrs. Leicester's School*; *Great Expectations*; *David Copperfield*; *Falkner*; *Frankenstein*; poor children; reading; education; memorials; bereavement; absent mothers.



(Frontispiece to 'The Sailor Uncle', *Mrs Leicester's School* (1809))

‘The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models’, writes Walter Benjamin.¹ Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860-61) famously opens with a child reading from a tombstone; however, there are important unacknowledged literary precursors of this image. Mary Shelley used a similar representation in *Falkner* (1837) and before that Mary Lamb in the short story ‘Elizabeth Villiers; or The Sailor Uncle’ from *Mrs. Leicester’s School* (1809). These fictional scenes draw on childhood experiences of Mary Lamb and Mary Shelley, as

well as on recorded reading practices of poor children who would use churchyards as their school and gravestones as their primer. This essay argues that there is a lineage of influence from Mary Lamb to Charles Dickens using scenes of children reading from gravestones. A certain amount of textual recycling takes place as Shelley and Dickens engage in recording how children could gain access to print in graveyards. The tomb is also a place where Mary Lamb and Mary Shelley touch on their own biographies, exploring how dead parents provide an education for their surviving children. The grave can represent a stable home that might have eluded the family in life, and it acts as a place for children to be with parents who communicate through the words on their tombstones, although that morbid education could become dangerous to the child.

This essay deals with the afterlife of texts and the continuing activity of memorials. It is about how literature always 'is' rather than 'was'. As Thomas Laqueur notes the dead maintain an 'embeddedness in the broader social world'.² There is a 'continued life of literary works',³ as even if texts are no longer much widely read, they can be found embedded in newer works. To a great extent Benjamin and Laqueur follow Marx's statement that history is made 'under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. [...] they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service'.⁴ This notion of transmission is the main driver behind this essay as it re-examines the art of Mary Lamb and instances of posthumous pedagogy. It scrutinizes what Laqueur calls the 'shared community between the dead and the living',⁵ that exists in another intertext, Wordsworth's 'We are Seven', where the young girl insists on the continuing presence of her dead siblings. It is a point that Wordsworth makes again in *The Prelude*, stating that there is 'One great society alone on earth:/ The noble Living and the noble Dead'.⁶

In 'Mackery End' from *Essays of Elia*, Charles Lamb alludes to the relationship he shared with his sister Mary, his co-author on the still never out of print, *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) and *Mrs. Leicester's School*, when he says: 'We house together, old bachelor and maid in a sort of double singleness'⁷. Their co-authored texts were published by Godwin's Juvenile Library and the Lambs knew Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley from her infancy. Charles Dickens did not meet Charles Lamb, Mary Lamb or Mary Shelley, but he did his best to reconstruct the spirit of the Lambs' company by assembling their surviving friends and making them close acquaintances. As Winifred Courtney points out 'Dickens inherited Lamb's *friends* to an extraordinary degree'.⁸ Indeed Dickens seems to have had friendships and acquaintanceships with many of Charles and Mary Lamb's surviving set: including Fanny Kelly, who Charles Lamb had proposed to in 1819, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Carlyle, Crabb Robinson, William Macready, Edward Moxon, who married Lamb's adopted daughter Emma Isola, John Forster, Thomas Noon Talfourd, Walter Savage Landor, Barry Cornwall (Bryan Procter) and Samuel Rogers, as well as George Cruikshank and William Hone who Dickens visited twice as he lay dying. *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens* finds '[Charles] Lamb's influence on several of Dickens's own essays discernible'⁹ but says nothing on Mary.

Edmund Blunden praises the abilities of both Charles and Mary to create children in their fiction, writing: 'her tales and her brother's seem to me extra-ordinarily sensitive in their impression of the world in which children move, and those things which to a child seem oddly important and, even if inanimate, possess life and influence.'¹⁰ That ability is evident in *Mrs. Leicester's School*, which was published anonymously by Mary Jane Godwin's Juvenile Library at the end of 1808. The book

was published in France as *Les Jeunes Pensionnaires* in 1824, and it went through at least ten editions by 1827. The Juvenile Library had already published the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1807, under Charles' name, and then the anonymous, *Poems for Children* in 1809. E.V. Lucas suggests that the reason for anonymity was that Mary did not want her name in print, 'probably from a natural shrinking from any kind of publicity after the unhappy publicity which she had once gained by her misfortune.'¹¹

The story has often been told of the circumstances of the death of the Lambs' mother, Elizabeth. The Lamb family had descended into poverty after the death of their father's employer, Samuel Salt, a Temple barrister, in 1792. They moved 'helpless and poor, and all huddled together in a small lodging, scarcely large enough to admit their moving about without restraint'.¹² Mary then trained as a mantua maker, which establishes that the Lamb family were then numbered amongst the labouring and working classes. Mary Wollstonecraft places this trade a notch above prostitute: 'For are not milliners and mantua-makers reckoned the next class?'¹³ With her mother ill, and her father senile, the weight of the family finances fell to Mary. To make matters worse her younger brother Charles was admitted to Hoxton Asylum for six weeks over the winter of 1795-6 as he exhibited the beginnings of a lifetime of mental troubles. On 22 September 1796 Mary, in a fit of madness chased her apprentice round the table in the room they occupied. Her mother intervened and Mary killed her mother with a knife to the heart. After a short period in an asylum Mary was taken into the guardianship of Charles and he remained her companion until he died twelve years before her in 1834.

Jane Aaron convincingly argues that in 'many of her stories for *Mrs. Leicester's School* [Mary] appears to be struggling, in covert ways, both to tell the tale of her relation with her mother and resolve the tensions it created'.¹⁴ Susan Tyler Hitchcock notes that '*Mrs. Leicester's School* is the closest we have to a book solely by Mary

Lamb' although it is now a 'scholarly curiosity'.¹⁵ Mary wrote seven of the ten stories in *Mrs. Leicester's School*, and also the same proportion in *Tales from Shakespeare* where she penned fourteen of twenty. *Tales from Shakespeare* had Charles's name on the book, 'against his wish',¹⁶ and Mary's name did not appear on the title page until 1838.¹⁷ Despite Mary writing the greatest proportions of these works, Thomas McFarland has called Mary a 'smothering burden' on her brother.¹⁸ In contrast, Robert Lloyd, who knew both, stated: 'They are the World *one* to the *other*'.¹⁹ Charles Lamb made sure that friends, such as Bernard Barton, were aware that Mary had a greater hand in their best-known works: 'My Sister's part in the Leicester School (about two thirds) was purely her own'.²⁰ William Hazlitt, a close friend of the pair, had high praise for Mary Lamb, writing: 'Did anyone here ever read *Mrs. Leicester's School*? If they have not, I wish they would [...] That is not a school of affectation, but of humanity. No one can think too highly of the work, or highly enough of the author.'²¹ Mary Wedd writes of *Mrs. Leicester's School* that 'charming though Charles's stories are, they do not compare in subtlety and sophistication with Mary's contributions.'²²

Mrs. Leicester's School could be seen as dangerous, write Mary Wedd, as it takes the 'revolutionary stance of 'attempting to imagine the world from the child's point of view' and succeeding.'²³ The work innovatively gives young girls their own voice, delivered from the perspectives of their ages rather than retrospectively by a narrator looking back. The Juvenile Library was certainly viewed as seditious. A Home Office spy report from June 1813 states that there is an 'intention to have every work published for the Juvenile Library that can be required in the early instruction of children, and thus by degrees to give an opportunity for every principle professed by the infidels and republicans of these days to be introduced to their motive.'²⁴ The spy report might not be as fanciful as it seems. Julie A. Carlson writes that the 'Juvenile

Library, which after all, spanned the period 1805-25, was an integral phase of Godwin's ongoing critique of family and his effort to perfect society through recomposing the next generation.'²⁵ Susan Manning explains how Mary Lamb could be regarded as a radical:

In this willingness to speak from the point of view of the child, to allow girl characters distinctive voices and ideas, and in its lack of interest in religious consolation for loss—preferring story-telling to scriptural instruction—*Mrs. Leicester's School* was readable in its own time as a 'school for treason'.²⁶

The book begins with ten girls, all under ten years old, arriving at Amwell School for the first time, with tears fresh on their cheeks. Here they meet with their unnamed teacher, but not Mrs. Leicester who never enters into the stories. The teacher begins by asking the children to 'relate some little anecdotes of your own lives'.²⁷ This method of framing a collection of narrative voices by having a stranger asking an assembly for their stories is something that Dickens later uses for the Christmas issues of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. As Fran Baker notes Dickens 'would invent a situation whereby a group of strangers are brought together and each in turn tells a story'.²⁸ In *Mrs. Leicester's School* the teacher tries to bring these lonely children together by getting them to learn something important about each other: 'Tell us the first thing you can remember; relate whatever happened to make a great impression on you when you were very young'.²⁹ All have, to some extent, been abandoned, writes Jane Aaron: '[in] *Mrs. Leicester's School*, narratives of social displacement abound; their overriding tone is one of childhood desolation.'³⁰ The first story is 'Elizabeth Villiers; or The Sailor Uncle', narrated by the titular character:

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 I now hear him say, "Who is it 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 manner, the epitaph on my mother's tomb being my primer and my spelling book, I learned to read.³¹

The grave is another home for the girl, a place where her mother lives and where she can 'learn pretty letters' from her mother's tombstone. The father's books and papers are put 'aside' for the stone where she can 'Go and see mamma'. Seeing her dead mother and reading the letters on the grave are things that belong together for Elizabeth.

Readers of *Great Expectations* will recognise similarity between what Elizabeth and Pip derive from reading a parent's gravestone. Pip states of his parents: 'I never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones.'³² Elizabeth visited her mother's stone to 'spell syllables and words' and this is mirrored by Pip in chapter 7 of *Great Expectations*: 'when I stood in the churchyard, reading the family tombstones, I had just enough learning to be able to spell them out.'³³ Dickens has a similar scene in chapter 1 of his closely related novel, *David Copperfield*:

I was a posthumous child. My father's eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me,

even now, in the reflection that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlor was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were - almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes - bolted and locked against it.³⁴

Like Elizabeth Villiers, David prefers being physically and mentally at the 'grave-stone in the churchyard' rather than at the warm house where he lives. David reaches out to the churchyard, feeling for it in the night when in bed, but the two homes are separate, 'cruelly [...] locked' apart when they should be united. This is similar to the child's relationship with the dead in Wordsworth's 'We are Seven', where she insists that the churchyard is a place where the living and dead coexist. *Oliver Twist* also 'often wandered' in a 'little churchyard: not crowded with tall, unsightly gravestones, but full of humble mounds [...] thinking of the wretched grave in which his mother lay.'³⁵

In 'The Sailor Uncle' Elizabeth feels more at home by the graveside than at the house and goes there 'Many times in the day'. There she would spend time with her father, 'jumping from the tombstone to the ground', rather like the goblins in *The Posthumous Papers of The Pickwick Club* 'playing at leap-frog with the tombstones [...] and bounding over the tombstones like footballs'.³⁶ In *Oliver Twist* that image recurs with 'the ragged boys' who play 'a noisy game at hide-and-seek among the tombstones, or varied their amusements by jumping backwards and forwards over the coffin'.³⁷ As Mark M. Hennelly notes, the image is also there in illustrations that Dickens commissioned, as 'Hablot K. Browne's cover designs for *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* both include images of a child leapfrogging a tombstone.'³⁸ Dickens

has other scenes of reading tombstones, such as in *Barnaby Rudge* when a raven appears 'to read the tombstones with a very critical taste'.³⁹ Dickens himself confessed to gaining some notion of the character of an unknown person from a stone. In a letter of 29 December 1838, Dickens related how he first conceived the character of Smike: 'There is an old church near the school, and the first gravestone I stumbled on that dreary winter afternoon was placed above the grave of a boy, eighteen long years old, who had died - suddenly, the inscription said; I suppose his heart broke ... at that wretched place [Shaw's school]. I think his ghost put Smike into my head, upon the spot'.⁴⁰ Phillipe Ariés writes that from the eighteenth century the grave becomes a place where a spiritual connection with the deceased can occur as they are to some extent resurrected by the disembodied voice of the inscription: 'the middle class of that period—were eager in their turn to leave anonymity behind and preserve their identity after death.'⁴¹ The tomb becomes a sort of temple.

Elizabeth Villiers gathers at the grave to be with her dead mother, but she is not like *Huckleberry Finn's* Emmeline Grangerford, obsessed with everything that 'was sadful'.⁴² For Elizabeth the graveyard is a place of joy, where the child would play around the grave and make 'merry jokes or pleasant stories', and 'talk of pretty mamma sleeping in the green grave'.⁴³ Nonetheless the latent morbidity of the dwelling is apparent to Susan the housekeeper, who knows the dangers of lingering in graveyards. The father and daughter, like Dickens's Durdles in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, have a 'touch of tombatism': 'I've got a touch of the Tombatism on me, Mr Jasper, [...] the Tombatism. It's another sort from Rheumatism. Mr Jasper knows what Durdles means. You get among them Tombs afore it's well light on a winter morning'.⁴⁴

The Villiers' family, like Pip's, have their dead buried near their home. This, argues Ariés, was a common practice from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, when graves would be visited and picnicked beside: 'in order to be able to visit them, the dead had to be 'at home,' [...] People went to visit the tomb of a dear one as one would go to a relative's home, or into one's own home, full of memories. Memory conferred upon the dead a sort of immortality'.⁴⁵ The father and daughter display what Laqueur calls 'our commitment to the dead's persistence of being'.⁴⁶ However, in 'The Sailor Uncle' the dangers of dwelling with the dead are directly apparent to newly arrived Uncle James, a Lieutenant in the navy, who had left England a few weeks after the marriage of Elizabeth's mother and father. He has no idea that his sister has been dead twelve months.

Like Scrooge, who reads his name on the gravestone in *A Christmas Carol*, Elizabeth is found by her uncle at a graveside, reading out her own name. Adriana Craciun concludes that as 'the girl and the mother share the same name, Elizabeth Villiers, the girl is in fact reiterating her own death.'⁴⁷ As Sarah Winter points out scenes of epitaphic reading like this 'become pivotal for forging thematic connections among death, kinship, and personal identity.'⁴⁸ These three factors are crucial in this story and James asks the lonely child: "Who has taught you to spell so prettily, my little maid?" said my uncle. "Mamma," I replied; for I had an idea that the words on the tombstone were somehow a part of mamma, and that she had taught me."⁴⁹ The uncle then asks to be taken to her mother:

At last I stopped at my mother's grave, and, pointing to the tombstone, said,
"Here is mamma," in a voice of exultation, as if I had now convinced him that I

knew the way best: I looked up in his face to see him acknowledge his mistake; but Oh, what a face of sorrow did I see!⁵⁰

They then go to Elizabeth's father who weeps when he sees his wife's brother, making the child angry with her uncle. A personal and literary relationship is then formed between the child and her uncle, who decides that real books rather than gravestones are safer deliverers of an education.

Had Dickens read Mary Lamb's story? Peter Rowland notes a similarity between 'The Sailor Uncle' and *Great Expectations* but does not know whether Dickens read *Mrs. Leicester's School*. However he concedes that it was "possible that Charles [Dickens] himself (a voracious reader) would have borrowed it".⁵¹ Rowland writes that Dickens was so obsessed by Charles Lamb's essays that he 'had, by the age of thirty, come very close to committing their contents to memory'.⁵² Dickens's favourite Lamb essay was 'Dream Children' and Michael Slater's points out that his "'Poor Relation's Story", is an exercise in the mode of Charles Lamb's "Dream Children" on the theme, very resonant for Dickens, of how imagination may compensate for unsatisfactory reality'.⁵³ While the works of the Lambs was not at Dickens's library at Gad's Hill, an 1844 inventory of 1 Devonshire Terrace shows that among his books are Moxon's 1840 edition of *Lamb's Works*. It is advertised in *The Monthly Review* with the puff: 'The tales by the "Young Ladies of Mrs. Leicester's school are mostly by Lamb's sister, a creature of kindred tenderness, simplicity and genius to himself.'⁵⁴ It seems then very likely that Dickens had read Mary Lamb's stories. Dickens's friend Henry Crabb Robinson certainly knew Mary Lamb's work, stating 'what grace and talent has she not manifested in *Mrs. Leicester's School*'.⁵⁵ Robinson passed *Mrs. Leicester's School* to yet another of Dickens's friends, Walter

Savage Landor, who enthusiastically responded:

Never have I read anything in prose so many times over, within so short a space of time, as *The Father's Wedding Day* [...] Richardson would have given his *Clarissa* and Rousseau his *Heloise* to have imagined it. A fresh source of the pathetic bursts out before us, and not a bitter one. [...] The story is admirable throughout—incomparable, inimitable.⁵⁶

William MacDonald points out 'several of the stories are based on circumstances in the childhood of Charles and Mary Lamb, and give a true account of what they felt and thought at the time'.⁵⁷

Charles Lamb anticipates Mary's image of Elizabeth Villiers at the grave in his 1797 poem, 'Written on the Day of my Aunt's Funeral':

Go thou, and occupy the same grave-bed
Where the dead mother lies.
Oh my dear mother, oh thou dear dead saint!
[...]
One parent yet is left--a wretched thing,
A sad survivor of his buried wife, ⁵⁸

The aunt, Hetty—her real name was Sarah Lamb, was buried with his mother. Lamb's 'wretched' father is the 'sad survivor'. Hetty also features in two of Lamb's essays, 'Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago' and 'My Relations' as well as in the story 'The Witch Aunt'. Dickens famously worried that his second autobiographical novel *Great Expectations* might go over old material and 'To be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetitions I read *David Copperfield* again the other day and was

affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe.’⁵⁹ It is perhaps in biography where part of the root of gravestone reading lies.

Like Dickens, Mary Shelley appears to have gained inspiration from Mary Lamb. The scene with the child reading from her mother’s grave in *Falkner* is very close to that in ‘The Sailor Uncle’, but perhaps the image was inspired by Mary Lamb’s close knowledge of Charles Lamb’s and Mary Shelley’s childhoods. Katharine Anthony writes that Charles Lamb ‘learned his alphabet from the gravestones before he could speak.’⁶⁰ E.V. Lucas states that Mary had instructed her brother from tombstones before he went to Christ’s hospital at the age of seven:

Mary Lamb was taking him through a churchyard filled with testimonies to the virtues of the dead, when he asked, ‘Mary, where are the naughty people buried?’

This must have been after he learned to read, which he did, we know, very young and very quickly, under his sister’s care.⁶¹

In an early biography of Mary Lamb, Anne Burrows Gilchrist also writes of Charles ‘it was with his little hand in hers that he first trod the Temple gardens, and spelled out the inscriptions on the sun-dials and on the tombstones in the old burying-ground’.⁶² The Lambs were not rich, and other accounts confirm that sometimes the poor did indeed learn to read from tombstones. ‘Sunday School Facts and Anecdotes’ (1813) has a teacher learn of a pupil’s access to print. Puzzled at his pupil’s rapidity at learning to read, despite being taught only one day a week at a Sunday School class, the teacher asked the boy how he did this. The boy responded:

“After I came to this Sunday School I resolved to spare no pains in learning to read, and being the best player at marbles among all the boys, it was my custom to play with a boy at ‘ring taw’ and win his marbles; we then went to the church yard, and I gave him a marble to teach me to read what was written on a grave stone, which, when I had learnt, we went to the next, and from that to another. As I kept on learning he received the marbles, and was very well satisfied with his pay. When I had parted with nearly all, we went to play again; and being such a good hand at it, I was sure to win them back. In this way I went on with different boys, till I had learnt to read all that was written on the grave stones; and having, besides this, the advantage of coming to school every Sunday, I have learnt to read in this short time.”⁶³

The boy only had access to print at Sunday School, and supplemented that sparse education with texts from the only library freely available to him, the ‘church yard’. Sometimes clergymen such as Legh Richmond would teach the children in their charge in the churchyard: ‘I sent the children to the various stones which stood at the head of the graves, and bid them learn the epitaphs inscribed upon them. [...] Thus my churchyard became a kind of book of instruction, and every grave-stone a leaf of edification for my young disciples.’⁶⁴ The graveyard was a place of harsh lessons in life and death for the children. Richmond said of his pupils, ‘young as they were, none of them were too young to die; and that probably more than half of the bodies which were buried there, were those of young children.’⁶⁵ There are other accounts that attest to the usefulness of gravestones for poor children wanting to educate themselves, as Christopher Anderson noted in 1828:

The native Irish are as eager to acquire the means of knowledge as they are prompt to learn. Children have been known to acquire the first elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic, without a book, without a pen, and without a slate, the place of instruction being no other than a grave-yard. The long flat stones with their inscriptions were used instead of books, while a bit of chalk and the grave-stones together served for all the rest.⁶⁶

The practice of children improving their reading skills in a churchyard is something that is recorded by Dickens, Mary Shelley, and Mary Lamb. They reflect the practices of poor disenfranchised children who desired an education and used one of the few places where print was freely available.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley certainly read at her mother's grave. The Lambs often met young Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and it is possible that Mary Lamb partly found the idea for a child reading from her mother's grave from knowing this. However a number of biographers go further, and claim that Mary Shelley actually learned to read from her mother's grave. Emily W. Sunstein is the main source for this notion, writing that William Godwin 'taught Mary to read and spell her name by having her trace her mother's inscription on the stone.'⁶⁷ Alan Richardson repeats this, writing, 'Godwin, first taught her to read and spell by tracing the letters on the gravestone of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.'⁶⁸ Joan Kane Nichols also has it that 'the first words' Mary 'learned to read were those that made up her mother's name on her gravestone.'⁶⁹ Charlotte Gordon sensationally states that:

William Godwin did not think it was odd to teach his small daughter to read from her mother's tombstone. [...] She began by tracing each letter with her fingers:

“Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin.” Except for the “Wollstonecraft,” this name was the same as hers: MARY GODWIN. One dead. One alive. This gravestone could be her own. She yearned to be reunited with her mother.⁷⁰

Here Gordon pretty much tells the story of Elizabeth Villiers, a notion suggested by the preceding page containing the frontispiece from ‘The Sailor Uncle’, showing Elizabeth and her father by the graveside. The 2018 film, *Mary Shelley* similarly has Mary learning to read from her mother’s grave. The story of Mary Shelley learning to read from her mother’s tombstone may well be true; but I have not been able to trace it further back than Sunstein. Nora Crook and Janet Todd, despite carrying out groundbreaking and widely cited research on Mary Shelley, have never made that claim.

Firmer ground for Mary learning at a gravestone, rather than learning to read from it, can be found in Nicola Trott’s analysis of how a teenage Mary is recorded as having read her father’s *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809) by her mother’s tomb on 22 October 1814. Godwin writes: ‘let us erect a shrine in their memory; let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can have’.⁷¹ For Godwin, the ‘Illustrious dead’ are ‘shadows [...] They are not dead. They are still with us in their stories, in their words, in their writings’. As Julie Carlson writes, ‘learning to see the dead as existing among the living, as capable of converse, and therefore of still influencing events--and learning to view this as a desirable state of affairs--is crucial to Godwin’s efforts to produce a benevolent and well-focussed citizenry.’⁷² Nicola Trott writes that the site of Mary’s reading ‘suggests an odd and powerful connection between textual and bodily presence [...] In Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin’s thinking, then, the author’s corpus, her body of work, was very closely identified with the author’s corpse, the remains of the grave.’⁷³ This corresponds with Phillipe Ariés argument that in the second half of the eighteenth

century tombs were a sign of presence after death. This presence derived from the survivors' unwillingness to accept the departure of their loved one. People held onto the remains.'⁷⁴ Mary Shelley became one of those people, holding onto what was thought to be the heart of her dead husband Percy, until her own death years later. Reading one's own name on a gravestone insists that identification between text, life and death is made by the reader.

Regardless of how Mary Shelley learned to read, it seems likely that she would have, like Pip, puzzled over the words on her mother's stone from first consciously visiting it. Wollstonecraft's grave itself references a book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, attesting to the afterlife of Mary's mother and her continuing agency in the on-going struggle for women's rights. In *Falkner*, Mary Shelley has Elizabeth Raby seeking the company and protection of her dead mother by visiting the grave each evening. Here she believed that 'her mother's spirit, which was obscurely associated with her mortal remains reposing below listened to her and blest her on that spot.'⁷⁵ The dead mother becomes Elizabeth's teacher, as 'neglected as she was, and left to wander at will, she conned her lesson, as she had been accustomed at her mother's feet, beside her grave.'⁷⁶ Elizabeth cons, learns, at the grave which becomes a place where, as for David Copperfield, Pip and Elizabeth Villiers, she might feel some parental affection: "'Mamma" was there beneath, and still she could love and feel herself beloved.'⁷⁷ As in 'The Sailor Uncle', a stranger arrives, and, corresponding with Wordsworth's 'We are Seven', he finds the notion of a person's continuing presence after death alien. The stranger asks:

"How came you here? what could you be doing so late, so far from home?"

"I came to see Mamma."

"To see Mamma! Where? how? Your mother is not here."

“Yes she is; Mamma is there;” and she pointed with her little finger to the grave.⁷⁸

In ‘The Sailor Uncle’ the mother’s grave is a danger to the child. Adriana Craciun writes that Elizabeth’s ‘dead mother provides an education both inadequate and dangerous’.⁷⁹ Jean Marsden notes: ‘the absence of the mother results in incomplete, inadequate, or incorrect learning.’⁸⁰ Jane Aaron sees *Mrs. Leicester’s School* as an ‘attempt at working through the pains of a neglected and misunderstood childhood [...] the tales that follow almost without exception tell of maternal absence or inadequacy, by the young narrators.’⁸¹ In Mary Lamb’s ‘The Young Mahometan’, Margaret Green’s mother has stopped talking to her almost completely and the child is then forced, rather like David Copperfield, to seek company in books. It is during her undirected reading that Margaret becomes convinced that she is a Mahometan, from a library book entitled *Mahometanism Explained*. Marsden goes on to say something that could be applied to Dickens: ‘Mary’s tales evince a deep suspicion of the maternal transmission of culture’, mothers are ‘absent, dead or neglectful’.⁸² It is a commonplace to say the same of Dickens’s works, where it is difficult to find a good mother.

In ‘The Sailor Uncle’ Elizabeth dreams of lying in the grave with her parents:

I used to wish I was sleeping in the grave with my 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, and my head resting upon the elbow of my father.⁸³

Elizabeth, thinking back to the time before her uncle took her away from the grave, 'used to wish I was sleeping in the grave with my papa and mamma'. Mary Shelley, similarly has Victor dream of being with his dead mother in *Frankenstein*: 'I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams [...] I thought I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.'⁸⁴ The grave is a deeply dangerous place for young Elizabeth as her 'father would tell me how quietly mamma slept there, and that he and his little Betsy would one day sleep beside mama in that grave'.⁸⁵ It seems that Betsy is threatened by immanent death from her father, and is not allowed to get beyond being 'little'. The depressed father states she will die soon, before Betsy grows to be an Elizabeth, and then the family will be physically together again. Reverend Villiers sees no future for his daughter at the start of the story and Elizabeth only becomes 'quite a companionable little being' after the uncle's intervention.⁸⁶ The notion Elizabeth has of lying in the grave with her parents disappears after uncle James leads her and her father away from the grave. Finally, Reverend Villiers tells his daughter something about the effects of loss when she grieves for her uncle after he departs. Elizabeth has been torturing herself over 'how unkind I had been to my uncle when he first came, and how sorry I still was whenever I thought of the many quarrels I had had with him.'⁸⁷ Elizabeth's father conveys important lesson he has learned from bereavement:

This is the sort of way we all feel, when those that we love are taken from us [...] only let it be a lesson to you to be as kind as possible to those you love; and remember, when they are gone from you, you will never think you had been kind enough. Such feelings as you have now described are the lot of humanity. So you will feel when I am no more, and so will your children feel when you are dead.⁸⁸

There is now a future for Elizabeth as her father projects her forward to a life with children and beyond to their deaths, which will be separated by time. They will no longer, as he intimated at the start of the story, die together. The homily shows how books, conversation and kindness can help a person come through the trauma of bereavement. Uncle James realises something of the danger Elizabeth is in and faces it by leading her away from the text on a tombstone –the only kind of print she can read at the start of the story – to printed books that can keep her from the grave.

Epigraphy, the features of the print on a gravestone, conveys something more to the reader than just the meaning of the words as Wordsworth notes in his 1810 ‘Essay on Epitaphs’: ‘a grave is a tranquillising object [...] The very form and substance of the monument which has received the inscription, and the appearance of the letters’.⁸⁹ For Elizabeth Villiers, the form of the words is an intimate family language that leaves her unable to read standard print in the books her uncle brings her. Elizabeth then has to be educated by her uncle to understand the language of others outside of her immediate family. Conversation with her ‘rough uncle’ transforms Elizabeth’s view of her mother: ‘Now I began justly to understand why he had taken such pains to keep my father from visiting my mother’s grave [...] I now thought of her as having been a real mamma, which before seemed an ideal something, no way connected with life.’⁹⁰ Elizabeth and her father recover from bereavement through being taken away from the grave and by giving Elizabeth’s access to print in books.

Shortly before he died, Coleridge requested in his will that a ‘small plain gold mourning ring, with my hair, may be presented to the following persons, namely: To my close friend and ever-beloved schoolfellow, Charles Lamb—and in the deep and almost life-long affection of which this is the slender record: his equally beloved sister,

Mary Lamb.’⁹¹ Coleridge also assessed the place of *Mrs. Leicester’s School* in posterity:

It at once soothes and amuses me to think—nay, to know—that the time will come when this little volume of my dear and well-nigh oldest friend, Mary Lamb, will not only be enjoyed but acknowledged as a rich jewel in the treasury of our permanent English literature; and I cannot help running over in my mind the long list of celebrated writers, astonishing geniuses, Novels, Romances, Poems, Histories and dense Political Economy quartos which, compared with *Mrs. Leicester’s School*, will be remembered as often and as prized as highly as Wilkie’s and Glover’s *Epics* and Lord Bolingbroke’s *Philosophics* compared with *Robinson Crusoe*.⁹²

Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, *Mrs. Leicester’s School* is not in any bookshops selling new books. At present, the options are old editions that have been digitised, print on demand, or second-hand copies. However, Mary Lamb and this book continue to have a posthumous hidden afterlife that is most readily seen in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which has never been out of print.

In 1836 Dickens left a calling card at an oyster house that read ‘Charles Dickens, Resurrectionist, In Search of a Subject.’⁹³ It was a joke the young Dickens made when he called for the editor Vincent Dowling. But it is a serious joke. Dickens like Thackeray usually situates his stories during the period of his boyhood, the 1810s and 20s and in doing so he reanimates the past. Dickens resurrects and develops Mary Lamb’s image of a child reading from a tombstone and gives it a more political edge as he connects an orphan’s lack of knowledge of their parents with educating the poor.

Unlike Mary Lamb's Elizabeth Villiers, and Mary Shelley's Elizabeth Raby, Dickens's child tomb-readers are poor, which reflects real-life accounts of poor children reading in graveyards. Elizabeth Villiers is not financially impoverished, but she is neglected and in danger, until books, society and conversation take her away from the grave and the pedagogy of dead and depressed parents. Dead and bad parents often serve as a metaphor in Dickens for government that has ignored the dangers children are in from little education, disease, vice, overwork, ignorance, and abuse. Dickens's reworking of the image used by Mary Lamb attests to the importance of tombstones as primers to learn the basics of reading and arithmetic. Lamb, Shelley and Dickens show an active educational connection between the living and the dead at a time when the Sunday School and churchyards might be the only access a poor child had to literature.

(7735 words with footnotes)

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