Charles Lamb, Emma Isola, and the Politics of Adoption, 1820

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IN OCTOBER 1820, WHILE THE TRIAL OF QUEEN CAROLINE RAGED in the House of Lords, Coleridge wrote to Thomas Allsop of his aborted plans to write about the affair:

> I actually began an Essay, and proposed a sort of *Diary*, i.e. Remarks Moral and political; according as the events, speeches, &c of each Day suggested them—& this in part in the hope of giving some advice & warning to the Queen herself—But Mr Gillman dissuaded me. Again, about 5 weeks ago, I had written a Letter to Connor, the Editor of the Eclectic Review, . . . offering, and offering to *execute*, a scheme of publication—'The Queen's Case stated *morally*—2. Judicially, 3. & politically'—But again Mr. G earnestly persuaded me to suppress it [.][1]

For his part, Charles Lamb did not fear to rush in where Gillman dissuaded Coleridge to tread. During the year of the run-up to the trial and its aftermath, Lamb both executed and published pointed verses about political characters and topics in *The Champion*, John Thelwall's oppositional rag. But the standard account of Lamb's publishing career in 1820 has long foregrounded instead the launch of the *Elia* essays, the first of which, "The South Sea House," appeared in *The London Magazine* in August. My alternative interest in Lamb's explicitly political activity in 1820 is much indebted to John Gardner, who has masterfully charted Lamb's eager engagement with headline national events of this tumultuous period, including the Spa Fields riots, the Cato street conspiracy, and the trial of the Queen.[2]

In this paper, I propose to add to Gardner's account of Lamb's late-Regency politics another notable event in his biography during the months of the Queen's trial, his meeting in Cambridge in the summer of 1820 with a twelve-year old orphan, Emma Isola. Until her marriage in 1833 to the young publisher Edward Moxon and Lamb's death in 1834, Charles and Mary Lamb served as adoptive parents to Emma. Through the rest of the century until her death in 1891, Emma Isola would typically be styled Lamb's "adopted daughter," a family relationship that has always been read—sometimes alarmingly—in terms of domestic affect, understood narrowly. In order to locate Lamb's relationship with Emma Isola on a political map, the starting point is national: the politics of adoption in the Queen Caroline affair, especially as it came to a boil in London from June through November 1820. My argument is that a surrogate child is a disruptive, oppositional figure in national politics at precisely the moment when Charles Lamb, Mary Lamb, and Emma Isola met one another in Cambridge and launched their own queer

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[1] CL 5:118-19.

[2] John Gardner, *Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street, and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (Palgrave, 2011).

family experiment.

During the summer of 1820, the heat was not the only reason to flee London. In 1814, the Princess of Wales accepted a payoff offer from the government to take her unruly entourage to the Continent. Headlined by her lusty attachment to her Italian lover Count Pergami, Caroline's rowdy carnival had a six-year run on the Continent until the death of the King in early 1820, when she could not resist the temptation to return to Britain to claim her title as Queen. Commencing with her uproarious return to Dover in June, London flared with popular agitation in support of the Queen, whose cause supplied a handy cudgel to bash the new King.[3] The despised Prince of Wales, at long last King, attempted to dispense with Caroline yet again by having the government initiate a Bill of Pains and Penalties (the charge: adultery) subject to a trial in the Lords, which began in August. In this bitter royal agon, it is very clear that Lamb's sympathies were oppositional and Queenite.[4] I won't rehearse all the good evidence, persuasively assembled by Gardner, but here is a sample, a quatrain by Lamb titled "On a Projected Journey" that ran in *The Champion* on July 15 and 16:

> To gratify his people's wish
> See G_____e at length prepare—
> He's setting out for Hanover—
> We've often wished him there.[5]

While London roiled on behalf of the Queen, the new King threw regular fits with his counselors in which he threatened to withdraw to the family territory in Hanover and yield the throne to his brother, the Duke of York. In this and many other instances, Lamb clearly not only tracked the scandal, unfolding daily, but was in fact a lively participant.

A notable figure in Queen Caroline's disruptive performance of family values throughout the Regency decade and during the trial was a surrogate child, William Austin. Because his story is not widely known, a brief summary will supply the groundwork for the summer of 1820.[6] In the fall of 1802, the Princess of Wales maintained, riotously, her own separate establishment, Montague House, on the edge of Blackheath at Greenwich. The one child of the disastrous royal marriage, Princess Charlotte, was six years old; the Prince of Wales and his warring spouse bitterly contested her care and supervision,

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[3] Among the wealth of scholarship on what is styled the "Queen Caroline Affair," a good start is Anna Clark, "Queen Caroline and the Sexual Politics of Popular Culture in London, 1820," *Representations* 31, no. 1, 1990, 47-68.

[4] Henry Crabb Robinson recorded this encounter with Coleridge: "Whilst the trial was going on and the issue still uncertain, I met Coleridge. 'Well, you are a Queenite, I hope, Robinson?' 'Indeed I am not.' 'How is that possible?' 'By no means. I am only an anti-Kingite.' 'That's just what I mean.'" *HCR on Books and Their Writers,* ed. Morley (1938) I, 258.

[5] *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Lucas (Methuen, 1905), V, 106.

[6] For a full account of Austin's strange life, see my article "Adoption, Narrative, and Nation, 1800-1850: The Case of William Austin." *Journal of British Studies*, 53, no. 4 (2014): 960-991.

and Princess Caroline was able to see her daughter only intermittently. Although many alternative narratives subsequently disputed the following set of facts, best evidence indicates that in November 1802, Sophia Austin, the wife of a laid-off Deptford dockworker, came to Montague House with a new infant to beg for assistance. The baby, William Austin, was immediately taken under care by the Princess and became a permanent and puzzling fixture of life with Caroline in the royal fast lane. Especially because it exasperated her despised spouse, Caroline cultivated an air of mystery about the child. Amply proportioned, Caroline was an infamously bawdy social ring-mistress, which meant that a clandestine pregnancy was not out of the question. The mystery of the child's origins led to the infamous "Delicate Investigation" by a secret Royal Commission in 1806, the Prince's first organized attempt to rid himself of Caroline by putting her sexual conduct under scrutiny. When Caroline left the country in 1814 for a half-decade of randy rambles on the Continent, William Austin was her constant companion, the focus of salacious rumor and diplomatic dyspepsia. This 1817 loyalist cartoon by Cruikshank of Caroline and her lover Count Pergami being presented to Metternich in Vienna is typical of the way the young William Austin was represented in hypersexualized caricature.

"R-y-l Condescension" © National Portrait Gallery. Used by permission.

When Caroline landed at Dover in 1820, William Austin was a prominent figure in the parade. Throughout the disorderly year, Austin featured in both loyalist attacks, in which he was tagged sarcastically as "Prince Austin," and in sympathetic portrait, as in this image from 1820, when he was eighteen (the tag "protegè" [*sic*] was a euphemism for shadowy progeny of the privileged).

William Austin, 1820. © National Portrait Gallery. Used by permission.

Although he was never called to testify in the trial, William Austin the surrogate child appeared frequently in press transcripts—what Coleridge calls

"the events, speeches, &c of each Day"—as servants were interrogated about who slept with whom and who laundered the bed linen.

In the summer of 1820, from mid-July to mid-August, Charles and Mary Lamb decamped from their Great Russell Street lodgings in frenzied London on annual holiday, renting rooms on King's Parade in Cambridge.[7] At the Trumpington Street house of Mrs. Paris, the sister of Lamb's friend William Ayrton, Charles and Mary over whist met two other inmates of Mrs. Paris's establishment, a Miss Humphreys and her niece, Emma Isola.[8] The twelve-year old Emma was the orphaned daughter of Miss Humphrey's sister Mary, who died in 1815, and her deceased father, the former university Esquire Bedell Charles Isola, who owed his ceremonial office to the good fortune of being the son of a much beloved Italian tutor of an earlier cohort of students, Agostino Isola. This peculiar trio—Charles, Mary, and Emma—immediately took to one another, so very well that Emma spent her Christmas holidays with the Lambs in London in January, and that visit went so well that thereafter all her holidays while she was at boarding school in Dulwich were spent with Charles and Mary in Great Russell Street and then in Islington.[9] Until her marriage to Edward Moxon in 1833, Emma lived with the Lambs, surrogate child to an odd set of surrogate parents. In outline, it's a touching and curious domestic tale: the two adults dutifully tutored Emma in mathematics and Latin, grooming her as a governess prospect. When Emma took a governess position and fell dangerously ill, the Lambs were sick with worry until Charles could retrieve her and help nurse her back to health. When Lamb soon after this crisis wrote his own will, he cared for Mary first, and then left all else to Emma, including a portrait of Milton that had long been promised to Wordsworth. At her wedding, Lamb performed the role, in his words, "as the grave Father, and behaved tolerably well, except at first entrance, when Emma in a whisper repressed a nascent giggle. I am not fit for weddings or burials."[10] A little over a year later, Lamb was dead. At Emma's death sixty years later, in 1891, the obituary in *The London Illustrated News* was headed "Charles Lamb's Adopted Daughter."

What are we to make of the 1820 launch of this ectopic family—alcoholic

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[7] The building at 10 King's Parade, opposite the porter's entrance to King's, currently houses the art gallery Primavera and a sweet shop. There is a small plaque high on the front exterior that notes Lamb's summer holiday residence in "1819." There is far better documentation for 1820; the 1819 date stems from Lamb's dating of the sonnet "Written at Cambridge" as "Aug. 15, 1819." My thanks to Justin Shepherd for steering me to the building and plaque. I've appended a photograph from August 2018.

[8] "Tradition identifies this house with that now known as 'Kenmare,' opposite Pembroke College," in F. R. Whitaker and H. P. Stokes, "The Isola Papers," *The Cambridge Review*, Nov. 1915-Jan. 1916, MS Add.8699/1/5, Cambridge University Library. Still identified as "Kenmare" on the door, the house (74 Trumpington St.) is a Grade II Listed Building, part of a current university redevelopment scheme (the Mill Lane Project). I've appended a photograph from August 2018.

[9] When the Isola children were orphaned in 1814 and 1815, Emma was seven and her youngest brother Frederick was two. A family account (see note 8) mentions that Frederick, a baker in Cambridge, exhibited a "speech impediment." By the time the twelve-year old Emma met Charles Lamb and his stutter, she would have been helping care for Frederick—and his "speech impediment"?—for five years.

[10] *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lambs*, ed. Lucas (Methuen, 1935), III, 381; this scene in the 1833 correspondence replays a scene in the *Elia* essay "The Wedding," published in 1825.

brother nearing fifty, intermittently mad older sister, and an adolescent orphan, age twelve? In the century after Lamb's death, memoirs and biographies typically account for the relationship with variations on the tag "adopted daughter." But because *de jure* adoption—formal, legal adoption—did not exist in England until 1926, hedged alternatives abound in these documents, in phrases such as "virtually adopted," "practically adopted," and "unofficially adopted." In the surviving record, Charles Lamb himself tests various formulas to describe Emma to both friends and strangers: she is an "Orphan," a "young person domesticated with us," "our young friend," "my incognita," "our inmate," and, once only, "our adopted young friend."[11] In correspondence, Lamb is always having to explain the mystery of Emma. Because their family story does not make plain sense, it is a tale that must be told again and again, in many forms. Here is one example, which underscores the fraught issue of naming and identity for a surrogate child. Charles is writing to his Enfield apothecary in 1828, during Emma's illness:

> Dear Sir, Some draughts and boluses have been brought here which we conjecture were meant for the young lady whom you saw this morning, though they are labeled for Miss ISOLA LAMB. No such person is known . . . She begs me to say that she was born an *Isola* and christened *Emma*. . . . She has never changed her name and rather mournfully adds that she has no prospect at present of doing so. She is literally I. SOLA, or single, at present. Therefore she begs that the obnoxious monosyllable [Lamb] may be omitted on future Phials,--an innocent syllable enough, you'll say, but she has no claim to it.[12]

In mid-20th century fiction and biography about the Lambs, interpretive confusion about Emma swerved off the road into tabloid ditches: Charles Lamb is in one fictional account a closet paedophile, and in a biography, Mary Lamb's madness is exacerbated by incestuous jealousy.[13] In response, the American scholar Ernest Ross quickly assembled a monograph for the Charles Lamb Society to demonstrate that Charles's actions, far from amorous, were appropriately, in his repeated term, "parental."[14]

It is telling that contemporary accounts of William Austin and later accounts of Emma Isola cannot resist inventing and policing transgressed sexual boundaries, which measures the power of both figures to disturb and unsettle established order. During the 1820s, both surrogate figures remain primary narrative puzzles. While regularly experimenting with how to explain Emma to friends and acquaintances, Lamb kept an interested eye on the

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[11] *Letters*, III, 86, 123, 199, 202, 243, 224.

[12] *Letters,* III, 255.

[13] Neil Bell, *So Perish the Roses* (novel, 1940); Katharine Anthony, *The Lambs: A Story of Pre-Victorian England* (1945).

[14] Ernest Carson Ross, *Charles Lamb and Emma Isola: A Survey of the Evidence Relevant to Their Personal Relationship*, The Charles Lamb Society, 1950; reprinted 1991. An updated account is Joseph R. Riehl, "The Last Days of Charles Lamb: Emma Isola," *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 85, Jan. 1994, 2-12.

various aftershocks of the Queen Caroline affair, with residual Queenite sympathies. As late as 1827, he was writing a poem with lines lamenting Caroline.[15] After Caroline's death in 1821, William Austin stayed in the news, even though he returned to live in Italy; popular press accounts continued to float rumors about his contested identity. Twice during the decade he returned to London to battle out in Chancery the terms of his inheritance as Caroline's residuary legatee, which is precisely the legal status bequeathed to Emma Moxon at Charles's death in 1834.

During the 1820s, both Emma Isola and William Austin function as fiction-generating machines. Their adoptive identities, radically contingent, are always narratively constructed.[16] The many narrative contests about William Austin's identity bobbed and weaved in disorderly fashion on the conspicuous stage of a dysfunctional royal family. The remarkable feature of the Lamb siblings as surrogate parents is that their status as a couple is itself a surrogate performance of marriage, what Charles famously referred to as "a sort of double singleness."[17] A sibling couple unsettles normative marriage in the first degree. A surrogate child then renders this surrogate marriage doubly contingent, to the degree that it balks explanation and interpretation. The manifold surrogate diversity of the Lamb family unit, launched in Cambridge in 1820, disrupts the normative biologism that lurks beneath dominant constructions of the family, tribe, and nation. Like a rich caricature, this trio both reproduces and parodies a bionormative family model: father, mother, child. Performatively, the trio queers the biogenetic props of both family and nation, in precisely the way William Austin functioned performatively on the national stage.

The Queen's trial in the Lords ended on the tenth of November in 1820 with the abandonment of the Bill of Pains and Penalties. I close with an image of Queenite disruptions in Cambridge, from a report in *The Cambridge Chronicle* on November 17, 1820. In London and throughout the nation, the chief sign of celebratory support for the Queen was the venerable popular method of illuminated windows. In London during peaks of disruption, those who didn't illuminate invited the crowd to take pleasure in smashing their windows. [18] Here is the grudgingly Loyalist press account of Queenite disturbances in Cambridge, dividing town and gown:

> On the 13th of November, the town was partially illuminated on account of the abandonment of the Bill of Pains and Penalties against the Queen. Two hundred and fifty special constables were sworn in. There were several town and gown riots in the neighbourhood of the Market Hill.

[15] The poem was published in 1831: "Lines, Suggested by a Sight of Waltham Cross," *Works*, V, 107.
[16] For adoption and narrative necessity, see Margaret Homans, *The Imprint of Another Life* (Yale, 2013).
[17] "Mackery End, in Hertfordshire," in *Elia & the Last Essays of Elia*, ed. Bate (Oxford World's Classics, 1987), 86.
[18] The Wordsworth family—William, Mary, Dorothy—returned to London from the Continent on Nov. 9; in Mary's unpublished journal on Nov. 11, she records "Illumination for the Queen—D. forced to say 'Queen for ever' as we walked home." DC MS 92, The Wordsworth Library, Grasmere.

None of the colleges were illuminated.[19]

Two hundred and fifty special constables in the Cambridge of 1820 is an eye-opening disruption for a town of only about 13,000 residents at the time (that's one constable for every fifty people). In this division of town and gown, the Lambs and Emma Isola clearly stand on the Queenite town side of the ledger. Those unilluminated colleges are the redoubts of established, normative power. One wonders: were the windows of 74 Trumpington Street illuminated?

Charles Lamb's oppositional capital is itself performatively narrative, as he shapes his own identity as a surrogate outsider to those very redoubts. From the second *Elia* essay, written about this 1820 summer holiday in Cambridge:

> I can here play the gentleman, enact the student. . . . Here I can take my walks unmolested, and fancy myself of what degree or standing I please. . . . The walks at these times are so much one's own . . . The halls deserted, and with open doors, inviting one to slip in unperceived, and pay a devoir to some Founder, or noble or royal Benefactress (that should have been ours) whose portrait seems to smile upon their over-looked beadsman, and *to adopt me for their own*. (emphasis added)[20]

It strikes me as not entirely coincidental that Lamb fashions his own surrogate identity at this 1820 moment under the banner of adoption, a mark of an outsider who for the next decade will perform, oppositionally, as a surrogate parent to a surrogate child.

Kenmare House, 74 Trumpington St, Cambridge, photo by author August 2018.

[19] *The Cambridge Chronicle*, 17 Nov. 1820, rpt. *Annals of Cambridge*, vol. V, Cambridge UP, 1908.
[20] "Oxford in the Vacation," (published Oct. 1820) in *Elia*, ed. Bate, 10; Lamb's habitual displacement of self generates the titular focus of the Cambridge essay.

10 King's Parade, Cambridge, photo by author August 2018.