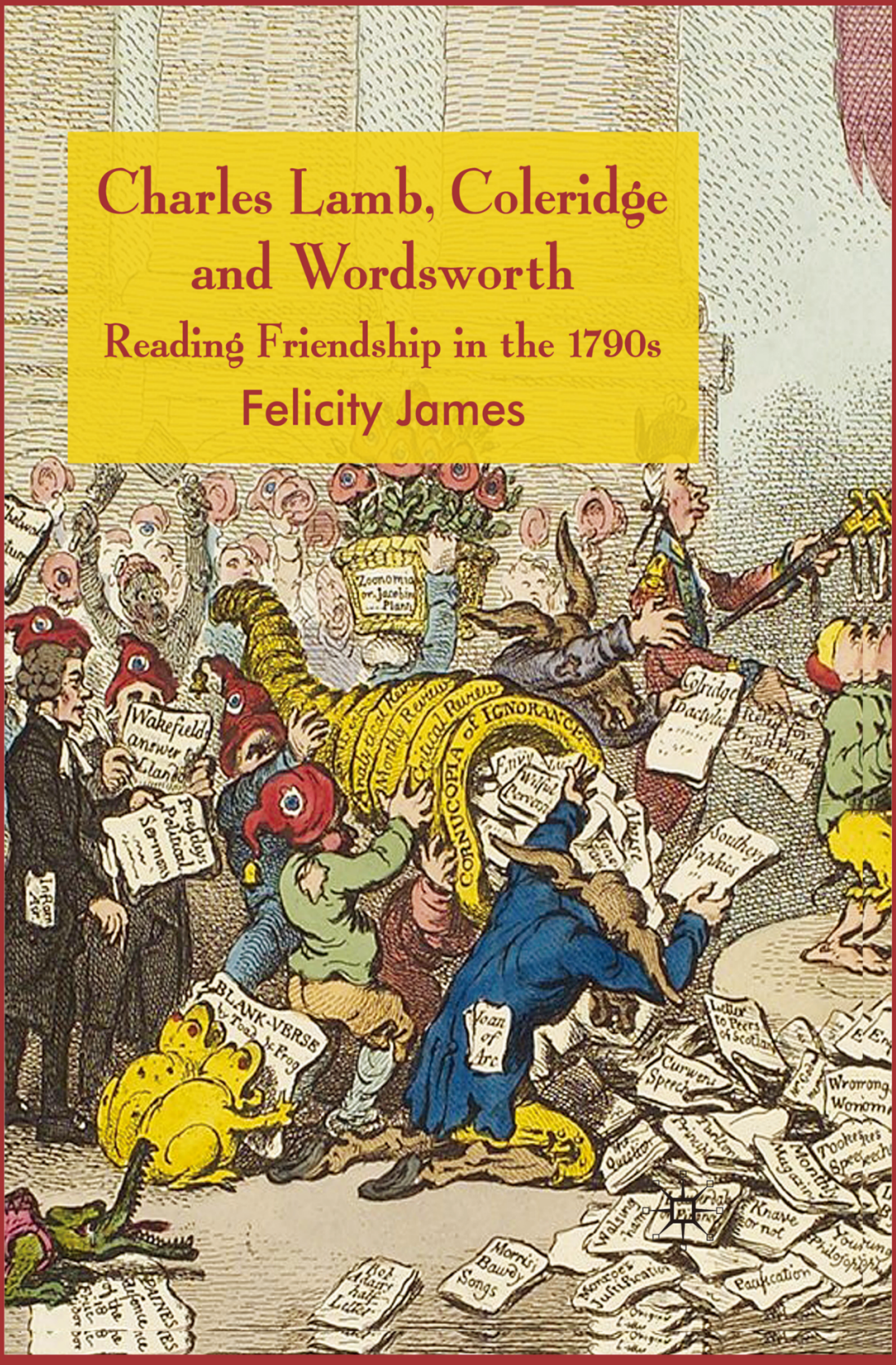
Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth

Reading Friendship in the 1790s

Felicity James



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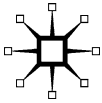

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List of Abbreviations

AA 1799	*Annual Anthology,* vol I, ed. Robert Southey (Bristol, 1799).
AA 1800	*Annual Anthology,* vol II, ed. Robert Southey (Bristol, 1800).
BiogLit	*Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eds, Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 7, 2 vols (London, 1983).
Borderers	William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca, NY, 1982).
BV	Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb *Blank verse, by Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb* (London, 1798).
CLB	*Charles Lamb Bulletin*.
Curry	*New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2 vols (New York, 1965).
Early Poems	William Wordsworth, *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785–97*, eds, Carol Landon and Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY, 1997).
EO	Charles Lloyd, *Edmund Oliver*, 2 vols (Bristol, 1798).
EY	*Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt; 2nd ed. rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford, 1967).
Friend	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 4, 2 vols (London, 1969).
FS	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Fears in solitude, written in 1798, during the alarm of an invasion. To which are added, France, an ode; and Frost at midnight. By S.T. Coleridge*. (London, 1798).
Griggs	*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956–71).
Howe	*The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930–34).
JW	*John Woodvil: a Tragedy. By C. Lamb. To which are added Fragments of Burton, the author of the Anatomy of Melancholy* (London, 1802).

Lectures 1795	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds, Peter Mann and Lewis Patton, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 1 (London, 1971).
Lucas	*The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 8 vols (London, 1912).
Lucas, *Letters*	*The Letters of Charles Lamb, to which are added those of his sister, Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols (London, 1935).
LY	*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth; Second Edition, Volume VII, The Later Years, Part IV, 1840–53,* rev. ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford, 1988).
LyB	William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, eds, James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY, 1992).
Marrs	*The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs, 3 vols (Ithaca, NY, 1975).
Mays	*Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 16, 3 (2 part) vols (Princeton, 2001).
MLN	*Modern Language Notes.*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly.*
MM	*The Monthly Magazine.*
N&Q	*Notes and Queries.*
Notebooks	*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds, Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen and Anthony John Harding, 5 vols (Princeton, 1957–2002).
Poems 1796	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Bristol, 1796).
Poems 1797	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Charles Lloyd, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Bristol, 1797).
Poems 1807	William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807,* ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY, 1983).
PJ	William Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), vol. 3 in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp, 5 vols (London, 1993).
Prelude 1799	William Wordsworth, *'The Prelude', 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, NY, 1977).
Prelude 1805	William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

PW	*The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, eds, W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974).
RC	William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar,* ed. James Butler (Ithaca, NY, 1979). Following Butler's identification of drafts, I use MS B to refer to the 528 line poem of January-March 1798, and MS D to refer to the 538 line copy of the poem made by Dorothy Wordsworth in a pocket notebook between February – December 1799.
RES	*Review of English Studies*.
RG	Charles Lamb, *A Tale of Rosamund Gray and old Blind Margaret* (London, 1798).
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*.
SiR	*Studies in Romanticism*.
Specimens	Charles Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived about the Time of Shakspeare* (London, 1808).
Watchman	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. by Lewis Patton, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series 2 (London, 1970).
WC	*The Wordsworth Circle*.
Works 1818	*The Works of Charles Lamb*, 2 vols (London, 1818).
YCL	Winifred Courtney, *Young Charles Lamb, 1775–1802* (London: 1982).

I have given all references to plays in the format Act: scene: line, and all references to poems by line number (if available); title of edition, page number. Multipart volumes are in the format volume number: volume part: page number.

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Permissions

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Introduction: Placing Lamb

On 9 July 1798, the 36th and last issue of *The Anti-Jacobin* carried a long poem, *New Morality*, a lively, vehement condemnation of 'Jacobin' attitudes and associates, which targeted Whig politicians and radical writers alike. Parodying the 'Theo-Philanthropic sect' of revolutionary sympathisers, French and English, it attacked their 'mawkish' sensibilities and 'blasphemous' sedition, and was illustrated the following month by the ruthless cartoonist James Gillray.[1] To feature in one of his cartoons – albeit distorted and undignified – was to have arrived on the political scene, and his bestiary of revolutionaries, capering around a deconsecrated St. Paul's, clearly showed who were the main 'Jacobin' targets of the government in the late 1790s. The Duke of Bedford dominates the image, a monstrous whale whose inspiration, as the poem shows, comes from Edmund Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord*.[2] Astride him are Charles James Fox and other Whig politicians, while William Godwin, a little donkey, and Thomas Holcroft, a snapping crocodile, scamper around. Before him, like Swift's image of the tub thrown to a whale, is a cornucopia of seditious literature. Pouring out come pamphlets and Whig newspapers – Mary Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman,* the *Enquirer,* the *Monthly Magazine* – pounced on by a donkey-eared Robert Southey, whilst Samuel Taylor Coleridge, also depicted as an ass, waves some *Dactylics* triumphantly. It is a reworking of Spenser's monster of Error, whose 'vomit full of bookes and papers was,/With loathly frogs and toades'.[3] And indeed, in the very middle of the cartoon, just at the foot of the cornucopia, sit a toad and a frog, croaking in glee as they clutch their own work, *Blank Verse* (1798). Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb are right at the heart of this panorama of dangerous radicals.

Yet even as the other figures from the cartoon – Godwin, Holcroft, Southey – are restored to the narrative of 1790s Romanticism, Lamb and

Lloyd tend to be excluded. *Blank Verse* remains obscure, unread: we have now forgotten about this other collaborative volume of 1798, whose experimental poetics of radical simplicity pre-empted *Lyrical Ballads*, and whose authors were once regarded as a 'Jacobin' threat. Such overlooked works – which sometimes nestle in close proximity to much better known counterparts – form the central focus of this book, which makes the case for the reconsideration and replacing of Lamb in the literary, cultural, and historical life of the 1790s, one of the most productive periods of his early career.

Part of the reason Lamb has been largely overlooked is the difficulty of placing him in the period. His politics were never overt or easily categorised; even some of his contemporaries were baffled by his inclusion in the *Anti-Jacobin* cartoon. 'I know not what poor Lamb has done to be croaking there,' Southey commented, and his confusion has echoed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[4] 'No one could be more innocent than Lamb of political heresy' asserted his Victorian editor and friend Thomas Noon Talfourd.[5] The great Elian E. V. Lucas – whose 1912 edition of the Lambs is still standard – agreed that the writings of Lamb and Lloyd 'were as far removed from Jacobinism as from bimetallism'.[6] For Talfourd and Lucas there is something comforting, even noble, about Lamb's apparent apolitical stance, a willed innocence which transcends worldly ties. For others, Lamb's evasiveness has been deeply frustrating. Apparently more interested in roast pig than Peterloo, Lamb's attention to the homely, the domestic and the familiar has been regarded with suspicion. Complacent, self-indulgent, interested in 'drink, gastronomy and smoking,' thundered Denys Thompson, while for Cyril Connolly, Lamb takes after Addison, an 'apologist for the New Bourgeoisie'.[7] For these critics of the 1930s, alert to the menace of war, Lamb is 'the bourgeois house-holder who lets the firebugs into his attic', who turns away from political threat to admire a tea-cup.[8]

Although this outcry soured Lamb's reputation through the mid-twentieth century, and probably triggered his gradual disappearance from school and university syllabuses, more recently this same evasiveness and resistance to categorisation has prompted some exciting criticism of both Charles and Mary Lamb.[9] The research of Burton Pollin and Winifred F. Courtney in the 1970s showed us how to read the *Anti-Jacobin* cartoon, demonstrating the ways in which Lamb was deeply – if idiosyncratically – involved with political thought of the period.[10] Jane Aaron's seminal monograph on the Lambs similarly showed the shaping importance of their historical and cultural context, while emphasising

the complexity of their own attitudes, the way in which the 'swerves and slippages of their language' register 'a number of apparently contradictory possibilities'.[11] Recent work has furthered our sense of the ambiguities of the Lambs' place in social and literary history. Mary Lamb has begun to receive sustained critical and biographical attention, and Elia's complex political and stylistic negotiations with his *London Magazine* context have been freshly analysed in the last few years.[12] Karen Fang has argued for an imperialist Elia, whose essays offer 'an inclusive, consumer version of the romantic tradition'.[13] Denise Gigante has similarly emphasised Lamb's consumerist power: re-reading the gluttony of Edax and Lamb's own ready appetite for snipes, plum-cake and brawn, she sees his sensual gustatory pleasures as a knowing 'assertion of low-urban taste' which critiques and challenges Romantic ideals of 'pure aesthetic subjectivity'.[14] Gigante's stimulating readings mark a welcome rediscovery of Lamb's lesser-known work, also evident in Judith Plotz's analysis of the sometimes disturbing imagery of children – child-sweeps, boiled babies, Child-Angels – in his later poetry, essays, conversation and letters.[15] The neglected drama *John Woodvil* (1802) has similarly been discussed very usefully by Anya Taylor as a way into understanding the shifting identities of Lamb's drunken selves.[16] It is an unsettling, disconcerting, provocative Lamb who emerges from these new readings – a belated response to Mary Wedd's 1977 call for us to 'put the guts back into Charles Lamb', and an acknowledgement that the suspicions of the *Anti-Jacobin* might not have been misplaced.[17]

I want to continue and expand these exciting new readings of Lamb back into the 1790s: he needs to be fully replaced in the context of these rough politicised exchanges of the revolutionary decade. Not only do Lamb's early works merit rediscovery and re-reading – he is also crucially important as a friend and shrewd reader of others in the period.[18] Exploring the constant negotiations taking place within his 1790s friendships, I show how his complicated political allegiances are interwoven with personal attitudes and arguments. I argue that certain enduring principles and loyalties underpin Lamb's writing – such as his background in religious Dissent – creating what Joseph Nicholes has termed Lamb's 'politics by indirection'.[19] The *Anti-Jacobin* satirists were right to place Lamb in the midst of Unitarians such as Joseph Priestley, whom he deeply admired. Such Unitarian allegiances helped to inform the ideal of friendship and sympathetic feeling which lies at the very centre of Lamb's creative and social identity. Having understood the importance of this ideal, we can then see more clearly the deeper

implications of his persistent focus on the homely and personal – and of his familiar, allusive style.

What looks at first glance like Burkean conservatism might very well be a beleaguered statement of Unitarian radical belief in home and family. A domestic quarrel amongst friends might have much larger ideological implications. An allusion to a friend's poem can open into a fierce political and literary dialogue, where attitudes to friendship, reading and writing, and society are simultaneously negotiated. I want to restore our sense of why that friendly pairing of Lamb and Lloyd – and their apparently innocuous verse of friendship – might have been viewed as dangerous by the *Anti-Jacobin*.

Although this book is about how friendship was read by (and in regard to) Lamb and his circle in the period, it is also about the importance of reading in these friendships. These were relationships forged through shared reading and mutual criticism, expressed through poems dedicated to one another and in dialogue with each other's work. Lamb is especially important as an intermediary, constantly reading and re-writing the works of his friends. Drawing both upon his Unitarian convictions and upon his eclectic and diverse explorations of literature, Lamb produces his own versions of Coleridge poems, and uses Wordsworthian techniques to describe his own urban experiences. In his diverse work of the period – letters, poetry, a novel, a drama and some playful forgeries – he responds on both a literary and an emotional level to his changing friendships with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lloyd. Phrases and ideas are transformed as they move from one context to another, from a letter by Lamb to a poem by Coleridge, from the private to the public sphere, and back again. While there is an enduring interest in the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lamb remains the missing link. Reading his little-known works alongside, say, Coleridge's contributions to the *Monthly Magazine*, *Osorio*, *The Borderers*, or *Lyrical Ballads*, allows a much fuller insight into the creative dynamics of early Romanticism, and of Romantic friendship. Meshed together through allusion, quotation, echo, and personal reference, these works create a larger conversation of friendship: coded, deeply allusive, politically inflected.

Tuning into these multiple voices, or exploring the *Anti-Jacobin*'s rowdy bestial panorama of radicals, runs counter to a key myth of Romanticism: the concept of solitary inspiration in nature, the lone poet secure in his rural, bardic isolation. It is exemplified by Hazlitt's image of a Wordsworth who 'lives in the busy solitude of his own heart; in the deep silence of thought' (Howe, XIX: 11), or by Benjamin Robert Haydon's classic portrait of Wordsworth alone above the mists of Helvellyn, far

removed from Gillray's raucous urban world.[20] The late-twentieth century saw a critical backlash against the emotional insulation of the solitary poet, and the perceived ideological shortcomings of the Romantic individualism he represented. More recently, there has been a recognition that his 'sociable other', in the words of Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, has been within view all the time.[21] Recent criticism has explored the collaborations and networks – literary, social, political, religious, emotional – which characterised the period. Nicholas Roe's work, to take one example, has replaced Wordsworth and Coleridge not only in the context of radical history, but also among radical friends such as George Dyer, John Thelwall, and John Augustus Bonney.[22] Moreover, they were supremely conscious of how their own friendships and personal relationships could 'offer a compelling prospect of social renovation'.[23] For instance, the Hunt-Keats circle, sonnet-writing and tea-drinking together in Lisson Grove, conversing and picnicking on Hampstead Heath, carefully constructed a sense of a communal poetic and political identity. For these friends, as Jeffrey N. Cox has shown, sociability was nothing less than a 'first step in healing the fissures in the commonwealth [...] reclaiming society's ability to transform itself'.[24] I show in my first chapter the widespread nature of this belief in the power of friendship as a social ideal and model for reform, from the correspondence of Unitarian ministers such as Priestley and Theophilus Lindsey, to provincial groups of young friends such as Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson. Lamb's friendships are rooted in this post-Revolutionary revaluation of social interactions: beleaguered from without and often contested from within, they nevertheless testify to a continuing faith in the reforming power of human affection.

The place of feeling is important in more ways than one to Lamb. Like Wordsworth, he attempts to define the landscape of affection, the power of the 'peculiar nook of earth' (MS D: 70; *RC*, 49), of emotional attachment to the 'local' (Marrs, I: 267). In Lamb's case, of course, these are located in London. His writing of the 1790s shows him forming his identity as a city writer, in response – and resistance – to the dominant narratives of rural inspiration put forward by Coleridge and Wordsworth. Constantly questioning the relationship between Romantic inspiration and environment, he has to negotiate the claims of town sociability and rural solitude in both personal and literary terms. Recent criticism is recognising that urban spaces – the bookshop, the theatre, the tavern – are as important to the landscape of the period as the Quantocks or the Lakes.[25] Lamb's gradual development of a city-based writing, formed in dialogue with Wordsworth and Coleridge, offers us an important insight

into how such spaces were imagined, and how the Romantic writer might feel at home in the city.

If Lamb is thinking about new landscapes of emotion, he is also striving to define a new style which can incorporate the urban and the rural, the literary and the homely. Over the 1790s he develops a characteristically familiar, companionable voice, which attempts to bring these contrasting models into dialogue, and to create a sense of ongoing conversation. It is no coincidence that the germs of his essays are found in his private letters to friends: his style is formed in friendship, and he then attempts to create a similarly sociable relationship with the reader, through irony, puns, quotation and allusion – personal and literary.

Allusive writing creates a company of texts, breaking down authorial isolation by drawing previous authors and future readers into conversation. This form of sociability took on a special importance in the period, as social ideals changed direction and became channelled into reading and writing. As Russell and Tuite suggest: 'Romantic-period Britain is notable as the era in which imaginative literature assumes a fully-fledged cultural and political authority [...] sociability as both fact and value, reconfigured and realigned as a result of the repressed utopian moment of the 1790s, was a crucial element in the shaping of that authority'.[26]

This repositioning of authority also leads – as has been well documented recently – to a frenzy of authorial anxiety in the period.[27] Writers worried both about how to situate themselves in relation to their predecessors, and the way in which they themselves might be received by an increased and newly anonymous audience, amid a multiplication of texts and speakers. What part does the sociability created by allusion and quotation have to play in these vexed questions of literary influence and reception? How does reading and writing in friendship fit into our narratives of Romantic influence and inheritance?

Recent work on allusion has challenged Harold Bloom's gloomy Freudian family romance of literary influence and its focus on the aggressive 're-writing of the father' in favour of a more open model.[28] Lucy Newlyn has outlined a 'competitive/collaborative relationship', which might play out in terms of a relationship between siblings, or a married couple – or close friends.[29] Her analysis of the interweaving of the creative identities of Coleridge and Wordsworth shows how allusion, friendship, and rivalry might be intertwined, and how we might as readers work to understand 'the vocabulary and grammar of a literary dialogue'.[30] Thanks to the work of Newlyn and others, we are now familiar with the way in which Coleridge's writing 'interbraids' with

that of Wordsworth: we have learnt to see their works 'as independent voicings of a mutual attitude developed in conversation', and dialogue as 'the essential generative condition of their poetry'.[31] Although my focus is slightly different, it is this work which underpins my readings of Lamb and his friends, as I explore their interlayered emotional and textual bonds. The allusive practice of the friendship group may swing between co-operation and rivalry, between love and envy, homage and parody. A text may act to enfold two authors, or a reader and an author, in a sociable space of understanding, but this is not always benign for all parties concerned. The joyous 'symbiosis' of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1797 and 1798, for instance, is formed – as I show in Chapters 4 and 5 – against a backdrop of isolation, distrust and argument between Coleridge, Lloyd and Lamb.[32] The allusions of *Blank Verse* voice a poetics of reproach, swiftly crystallising into anger after Coleridge's allusive parodies in the 'Nehemiah Higginbottom' sonnets, which encourage the reader to join in a 'good-natured laugh' against the melancholy sensibilities of Lamb and Lloyd (*BiogLit* I: 26–7).

And yet, as I show in the final part of the book, allusion can carry an idealistic, restorative charge. Christopher Ricks, while acknowledging 'the possibility of envy and malignity', calls for allusion's more meliorative, generous function to be acknowledged.[33] He finds this allusive gratitude at its richest in Keats, and explains it in terms of Keats' 'sense of brotherhood with his peers. He declines the invitation to figure in the dark melodrama of *The Anxiety of Influence*'.[34]

The allusive happiness celebrated by Ricks connects with Cox's demonstration of Keats' belief in the 'key value' of sociability as a model for social reform. For Keats – as for Lamb – reading and writing are sociable, friendly practices, and their use of allusion expresses this sense of creative community. We can link Ricks' identification of a literary 'sense of brotherhood', moreover, with Russell and Tuite's assertion that the 'repressed utopian moment of the 1790s' lives again in the sociability of Romantic literature. As I explore in my first chapter, this sociably allusive practice counters and responds to another richly allusive, intertextual writer, Edmund Burke. Whereas Burke's use of allusion is intended to emphasise the crucial importance of tradition and continuity, these friends are self-consciously creating new textual communities. The sociable power of visions such as Coleridge's Pantisocratic scheme becomes invested – and to some extent, realised – in Lamb's allusive, inclusive style.

The first two chapters of my study show the importance of such ideals of affection and community in forming Lamb's concepts of friendship

and affection. Delicately poised between conservative retreat and radical engagement, they find their first expression through an intense, religiously inflected idealisation of particular friends – especially Coleridge. But such ideals quickly collapse, partly under the pressure of Lamb's domestic situation, and partly because of the impossible burden of expectation laid upon friendship by all members of the group. The second part of my study therefore frames a narrative of disappointment, regret and desolation, as both Lamb's family life and his friendships fall apart. In Chapter 3, I deal with Lamb's re-evaluation of personal feeling in the aftermath of Mary's matricide in 1796, discussing his response to Coleridge's letters of consolation. Chapter 4 focuses closely on Lamb's interactions with Coleridge and Wordsworth during the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads* and examines his crucial role in the relationships of the 'annus mirabilis'. I take as my starting point Lamb's first visit to Nether Stowey in summer 1797, examining his contributions and reactions to the dialogue between 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison' and 'Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree', and between *Osorio* and *The Borderers*, replacing the poems and plays in the literary and personal context of the summer of 1797. Lamb's work now turns towards a darker exploration of religious vanity and personal failings, helping us to understand and to re-read the coded personal dramas of friendship and reproach at work in the plays and poetry of the whole group at this period. *Blank Verse*, for instance, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 5, is shaped both stylistically and thematically by the collapse of the friendship ideal.

However, as Lamb comes to terms with the destruction of his early friendship ideals, he begins to recreate them in textual form. The third and last part of my study argues that the subtle allusive strategies he begins to adopt in 1798 and 1799 are intricately connected to his developing concepts of reading and friendship. Through close readings of *Rosamund Gray, John Woodvil*, and his letters to Wordsworth, I show how his work comes eventually to enact the sociability he had once envisaged in company with Coleridge, bringing his many diverse allegiances – social, political and literary – into dialogue. This is not to suggest a post-Revolutionary shrinking from social engagement. Rather, Lamb is actively attempting to find a workable expression of personal attachment: throughout the 1790s, he is negotiating the place of sympathy and fellow-feeling, as writer, reader, and friend.

My argument recognises the ways in which readers of Lamb have always responded to his 'social sentiment'.[35] His contemporaries' appreciation of his writing is often bound up with descriptions of his own sociability, such as Haydon's recreation of the 'immortal dinner',

for example, as 'an evening worthy of the Elizabethan age,' which 'will long flash upon "that inward eye which is the bliss of Solitude"', or Hazlitt's evocation of the 'many lively skirmishes' of the Lambs' Thursday evening parties: 'How often did we cut into the haunch of letters, while we discussed the haunch of mutton on the table! [...] "And, in our flowing cups, many a good name and true was freshly remembered"' (Howe, XII: 36).[36]

Both Haydon and Hazlitt create a narrative of sociability which brings the work of the group – Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' – into dialogue with forebears such as the Elizabethan poets and dramatists. Hazlitt's 'flowing cups', similarly, are a rewritten version of Henry the Fifth's reassurance to the 'band of brothers' that their exploits in battle will be remembered by future generations. Haydon and Hazlitt are continuing the work started by Lamb in his early letters to Coleridge, self-consciously creating a literary history of group Romanticism, a reconstruction of past friendship which is also a plea for future readership. The single-authored work – whether it is Haydon's diary, or Hazlitt's *London Magazine* essay, or Lamb's letters – has now to be representative of the sociable conversation, and the reader is called upon to supply an answering conviviality.

The aim of this study is to hear some of these sociable conversations of Romanticism more fully, and to appreciate the complexity of 'reading friendship' in the period. A close study of Lamb, I hope, will not only restore some of his little-known works to our discussion of the period, but also suggest some of the different ways in which friendship was 'read' in the period. He raises questions about how friends read one another, and attempt to befriend their reading audience – and also constantly challenges our own reading sympathies.

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Part I
Idealising Friendship

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1
Frendotatoi meta frendous: Constructing Friendship in the 1790s

December 1794

December 1794: a small dark back room in a London tavern, the 'Salutation and Cat'. A group of young men, all in their early twenties, are talking eagerly over steaming egg-nog, in a fug of Orinoco tobacco-smoke. This 'nice little smoky room' is a key space of 1790s Romanticism – a place of idealism, of shared creativity and mutual inspiration, where a group of friends gathers to read, write and talk of reform, both in poetry and politics (Marrs, I: 65). At the centre of this group is Coleridge, fresh from Cambridge. Through the winter of 1794, he had been active on the London literary scene, quarrelling with Holcroft, meeting Godwin, and publishing in the *Morning Chronicle*. He took the 'Salutation' as his base, and, since it was just opposite the gate of his old school, Christ's Hospital on Newgate Street, he was joined there by numerous school-friends: George Dyer, Robert Allen, Samuel Favell, the Le Grice brothers, Charles Valentine and Samuel – and Charles Lamb.

Lamb, born 1775, had been Coleridge's junior at Christ's Hospital, and had looked up to him, a 'Grecian', or senior scholar, destined for university and the Church. Lamb himself, partly because of his stammer, never became a Grecian, and in November 1789 left school to work. His background was modest, and his social position slightly ambiguous, since his father John worked as a waiter in the Inner Temple and a servant to Samuel Salt, one of the 'Old Benchers' celebrated by Elia. In 1792 Salt died, and the Lamb family had to leave his house in the Inner Temple; his parents were growing increasingly frail, and Lamb's wages were vitally necessary to help support his family. By 1794, Lamb had begun the job he was to hold for the rest of his life, working as a clerk in the vast East India House on Leadenhall Street. Eager for literary

company, his evenings with Christ's Hospital friends Dyer, Allen, James White, and Coleridge were a focal point of his life in the mid-1790s. Once Coleridge had left London, 'the little smoky room' became the centre of Lamb's memories, and he wrote constantly to Coleridge recalling their meetings. The yearning letters form a counterpart to Coleridge's 1796 edition of *Poems on Various Subjects,* which included several poems by Lamb and one written with Favell. The letters and the volume of *Poems* are in dialogue, a conversation which has at its heart the memory of that small shared space of the 'Salutation' back-room, an emblem for their friendship.

These conversations are the important precursors of those much more famous discussions which take place when Coleridge meets Wordsworth: his early collaborations and experiments, however, have not attracted so much attention, despite being vital in the formation of the poetic relationships of 1797 and 1798. Indeed, the 'little smoky room' itself finds an incongruous rural parallel in a later space of friendship, Thomas Poole's bower at Nether Stowey. This 'lime-tree bower' is a frequent image of friendly, creative sociability among Coleridge's friends in the late 1790s. It is the 'Jasmine harbour' of the publisher Joseph Cottle's *Reminiscences*, supplied with bread and cheese and true Taunton ale, and it appears, also, in William Hazlitt's essay, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets':

> Thus I passed three weeks at Nether Stowey and in the neighbourhood, generally devoting the afternoons to a delightful chat in an arbour made of bark by the poet's friend Tom Poole, sitting under two fine elm-trees, and listening to the bees humming round us, while we quaffed our *flip*. (Howe, XVII: 119)[1]

This is a manly sort of pastoral, in which chat and poetry are roughened up by proximity to sociable male quaffing, a pattern which will be repeated as these writers try to defend and toughen notions of sensibility in retreat. It is also a very sensory experience, as tastes and sounds, such as those humming bees, are evoked to summon up a fully sympathetic experience.

This points to the wider meaning of the bower. It is a small spot, a 'narrow' scene, which, paradoxically, can hold a whole world within it:

> No scene so narrow, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love & Beauty[2]