



Matthews, S. (2015). 'Spinning at Poor Bodies' Wheels': Charles and Mary Lamb, Work, and 'Angel Help'. *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, (162), 100-118.

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
Unspecified

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available via the Charles Lamb Society at <http://www.charleslambociety.com/b-online.html>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

**‘Spinning at poor bodies’ wheels’:
Lamb on Work, Wheels, and ‘Angel Help’**

On a visit to the house of their friends the arts patrons Charles and Elizabeth Aders in spring 1827, Charles and Mary Lamb saw a drawing that made a striking impression upon each of them, though their responses were very different (Fig. 1). Executed in black ink on grey-washed paper, the scene is a domestic interior by night. In the foreground, a young woman with long, waving hair, the household keys fastened at her waist, has fallen asleep in a chair in front of a spinning wheel; an older woman, probably her mother, is asleep in a curtained bed. The older woman’s drawn expression, the rosary clutched in her hand, and nearby medicine bottle and spoon suggest that she is ill or dying; an empty chair by the bed and nearby book imply that the young woman had been sitting with the invalid before returning to her work. At the centre of the composition an oil lamp burns. This light-source, and the scene’s naturalistic features, are put in the shade by supernatural elements which the artist has highlighted in gold: heavenly rays emitted from a crucifix on the wall are reflected on the heads of three angels assisting the pious household: one turns the spinning wheel, another twists the yarn on the distaff, and on the far left a third waters a lily, emblem of virginal innocence – the innocence of the young woman, whose hair and cross are also touched by heavenly light.

The drawing is by German artist, Jacob Götzenberger (1802-1866), who as a 25-year-old student presented it to the Aders in thanks for their hospitality in early February 1827. Stylistically indebted to the late fifteenth- and early- sixteenth century German and Netherlandish art that dominated the Aders’ collection, the sacred scene

proposes a transcendent reward for virtue and duty.¹ Yet the concreteness of the depiction, from the heavy folds of the figures' drapery and woodgrain detail in the floor and furniture, to the wall-mounted clock and Saxony-style spinning wheel, also articulates a concern with everyday human experience, with time and work, life and death, and contemporary social relevance. The Lambs' responses survive in the shape of two ekphrastic poems composed shortly after: Charles's sentimental yet affecting paean to virtuous poverty, first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in June 1827 as 'Angel Help'; and Mary's shorter skit first published by E. V. Lucas in 1903 as 'Nonsense Verses' misattributed to Charles.² Elizabeth Aders preserved the fair copies of both poems in Charles's hand, together with two short letters concerning them, with Götzenberger's drawing in her album, now at Harvard University.³

In a helpful 1974 article, James T. Wills transcribes the manuscript poems from the album, makes some corrections to Lucas in reconstructing their composition and publication histories, and provides brief interpretations of the poems in relation to the drawing and to each other.⁴ This article reconsiders the poems in relation to the well-known topic of Charles Lamb's critique of work, and also in relation to the less discussed significance of needleworkers, spinners and tailors in his writings, and his familiarity with the textile trade and needleworking industry. Lamb's contact with the latter derived from two main sources: his daily work on the East India Company accounts, and his sister's early life. From her mid-teens, Mary worked long, poorly paid hours as a mantua-maker (dressmaker), and during her twenties also carried an

¹ On the Aders' collection, see Morton D. Paley, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Fine Arts* (Oxford, 2008), 83-92.

² *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols (London, 1903), V, 48-9, 109.

³ Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Eng 1094, fol. 20-23. Elizabeth Aders' album also includes a fair copy of Lamb's poem 'To C. Aders Esq., on his Collection of Paintings by the old German Masters' (fol. 30), and three other Götzenberger drawings (fol. 10, 18, 50).

⁴ James T. Wills, 'New Lamb Material in the Aders Album: Jacob Götzenberger and Two Version of "Angel Help"', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 22 (1974), 406-13.

increasingly stressful burden of housework and nursing responsibilities in the family home. While the 'day of horrors' in September 1796, when Mary killed their mother Elizabeth Lamb during a fit of insanity, is the most obvious cause of Charles's ambivalence about women's domestic work, my interest is not biographical per se. It is rather that for Lamb, the material symbols of monotonous women's work – whether the basic materials of textile, thread and yarn, or the enabling tools of needles, scissors and spinning wheels – become subtly ambivalent analogies for an oppressive culture of incessant work, whereby the worker's time is never truly her or his own, whether outside or inside the home. The grinding routine of work experienced as extending into an endless futurity, or terminated only by incapacity or death, became associated for Lamb with humanity's fallen condition, presided over by the figure of Satan, 'like a wheel', in the words of the sonnet 'Work', discussed below.⁵ As an organising metaphor for the punishing role of work in human life, the ever-turning wheel brings into association the ancient wheel of fortune, the Catherine wheel of medieval torture, the contemporary mills and factories of industrial Britain, and William Cubitt's prison tread-wheel – as well as the domestic spinning-wheel. Lamb saw that needlework could be an oppressive instrument for women, but the wheel became for him a symbol that transcends gender. The wheel represented the increasingly powerful machine of industry and business in early nineteenth-century society; the simple spinning-wheel, an anachronism in the age of the northern cotton-mills's steam-powered spinning jennies, also encoded the experience of the individual worker. Lamb encountered Götzenberger's study two years after the end of his thirty-three year 'slavery' in the Accountant-General's Office at East India House. The consolations of retirement were not unmixed with a sense that long habituation to work routine had left him unfitted to

⁵ 'Work', l. 11, in Lucas, *Works*, V, 55.

make the most of his freedom. Yet in the figure of the sleeping spinster, he saw also a way to re-imagine the pressure of domestic and paid work that had shaped his and Mary's lives together.

*

Lamb's working life centred geographically on the City of London, in an area where many workers and livery companies associated with the textile, needlework and clothing trades were located. In 1791-2 his first post was in the office for Pacific Trade at the South Sea House in Threadneedle Street; he then moved a short distance south down Bishopsgate Street to the East India House in Leadenhall Street, the eastern continuation of Cornhill, where he remained until taking his pension in spring 1825. Local small businesses included tailors, milliners and needleworkers. Several textile-related livery companies had prominent halls in the area, such as the Merchant Taylors' Hall at 30 Threadneedle Street (South Sea House was at 38). The very name of Threadneedle Street derives 'either from the three needles which appear in the arms of the Needlemakers' Company or the thread and needle employed by the Merchant Taylors'.⁶

The textile trade was not only a defining feature of the City streetscape, but the subject of much of Lamb's daily accounting work. Entries regarding imported textile products, including cotton, silk, and calico, and fabric dyes such as indigo, appear repeatedly in East India Company account ledgers. The market's volatility had a direct impact on Lamb's workload. Winifred Courtney notes that 'Sales of indigo by the East India Company multiplied fivefold between 1792 and 1795, but no additional staff was taken on by the Accountant's Office'.⁷ Writing to Wordsworth in September 1814,

⁶ *The London Encyclopaedia*, ed. Ben Weinreb et al, 3rd edn. (London, 2008), 916.

⁷ Winifred Courtney, *Young Charles Lamb, 1775-1802* (London, 1982), 100.

Charles explains that due to staff absences and ‘the deficient state of payments at E. I. H. owing to bad peace (sic) speculations in the Calico market’, he has been working at home as well – ‘evening work, generally at the rate of nine hours a day’ – with resulting low spirits and anxious dreams.⁸ In the persona of Elia, his involuntary and impressionistic acquaintance with the textile trade is recast as a joke against the speaker’s poor credentials for business. In ‘The Old and the New Schoolmaster’, on Elia’s evening commute home by coach, he finds himself in a dreaded tête-à-tête with ‘a sensible, well-informed’ stranger (the ‘new schoolmaster’):

We were now approaching Norton Falgate, when the sight of some shop-goods *ticketed* freshened him up into a dissertation upon the cheapness of cottons this spring. I was now a little in heart, as the nature of my morning avocations had brought me into some sort of familiarity with the raw material; and I was surprised to find how eloquent I was becoming on the state of the India market—when, presently, he dashed my incipient vanity to the earth at once, by inquiring whether I had ever made any calculation as to the value of the rental of all the retail shops in London.⁹

The speaker’s ‘morning avocations’ should guarantee that he can discourse with authority on the cotton market. However, even in his supposed area of expertise, he cannot keep up with the schoolmaster’s automaton-like quest for factual information: ‘some sort of familiarity with the raw material’ is actually a disqualification. Lamb simultaneously conveys Elia’s unease at being found wanting, and the unnerving quality

⁸ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. E. W. Marris, 3 vols (Ithaca, NY, 1975-8), III, 111-112.

⁹ Lucas, *Works*, II, 50.

of the stranger's ability only to trade in 'speculations reducible to calculation', like the 'Caledonian' of 'Imperfect Sympathies'. When in the early essay 'Oxford in the Vacation' Elia tries to explain the relation between his identity as an author and his professional life as 'a votary of the desk', he transforms the East India Company's textile commodities into objects of meditation:

I confess that it is my humour, my fancy—in the forepart of the day, when the mind of your man of letters requires some relaxation[...]—to while away some good hours of my time in the contemplation of indigos, cottons, raw silks, piece-goods, flowered or otherwise. [...] The enfranchised quill, that has plodded all the morning among the cart-rucks of figures and cyphers, frisks and curvets so at its ease over the flowery carpet-ground of a midnight dissertation.—It feels its promotion. * * * * So that you see, upon the whole, the literary dignity of *Elia* is very little, if at all, compromised in the condescension.¹⁰

Reversing his own identity as full-time employee and part-time author, Charles proposes that Elia is a 'man of letters' for whom office work is a whim and positive relaxation in preparation for evening's literary work. The labour of book-keeping is reinvented as an aesthetic 'contemplation' which selects only textiles from the East India Company's broad portfolio of commodities, and whereby a morning meditation on 'piece-goods, flowered or otherwise' enables the quill-pen's evening dance across 'the flowery carpet-ground'. Still, the comic conceit by which the labour of the 'notched and cropt scrivener' masquerades as a leisure pursuit and spiritual exercise leads to a less

¹⁰ Lucas, *Works*, II, 7-8.

consoling implication: to 'while away some good hours of my time' is also to waste time. Similarly, by a poetic suggestion, the raw materials are woven into the dissertation, since a mass of flowers is evoked via a similitive 'carpet'; however, Elia goes on to note 'certain flaws, which a cunning carper might be able to pick in this Joseph's vest' of 'the many commodities incidental to the life of a public office'. Just as in Genesis 37:23 Joseph's 'coat of many colours' changes its symbolic value from token of the elderly father's love, to sign of fraternal jealousy and hatred, the speaker himself turns 'cunning carper' to regret the loss of 'those consolatory interstices, and sprinklings of freedom, through the four seasons,--the *red-letter days*, now become, to all intents and purposes, *dead-letter days*'.¹¹ The flaw in the fabric of Joseph's 'vest' is the effect of commercial interest and the profit motive on the lives of individual workers. This is suggested by 'commodities', use in its older sense of 'benefits', while punning on the primary modern meaning of material goods traded for profit. It is implied that businesses, such as the East India Company, which have outlawed the celebration of saints' days on the grounds that the practice is 'papistical', are hypocritically using religion to mask the exploitation of workers and to boost profit.

In her fine chapter on work and time in *A Double Singleness* (1991), Jane Aaron notes in Lamb's writings 'The association of work, and particular of the East India Company, with the hosts of Satan'.¹² I would extend this observation to include the association of Satan, as author of the Fall, with needleworking and the textile and clothing industries. In 'On the Melancholy of Tailors', published in *The Champion* in December 1814, the speaker's primary explanation for his claim about the tailor's 'professional melancholy' is the fall of mankind:

¹¹ Lucas, *Works*, II, 8.

¹² Jane Aaron, *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Oxford, 1991), 92.

[M]ay it not be, that the custom of wearing apparel being derived to us from the fall, and one of the most mortifying products of that unhappy event, a certain *seriousness* (to say no more of it) may in the order of things have been intended to be impressed upon the minds of that race of men to whom in all ages the care of contriving the human apparel has been entrusted,— to keep up the memory of the first institution of clothes, and serve as a standing remonstrance against those vanities, which the absurd conversion of a memorial of our shame into an ornament of our persons was destined to produce?¹³

Lamb's later demotion of Joseph's 'coat of many colours' to a flawed 'vest' in 'Oxford in the Vacation' may be better understood in the light of this view of tailors as living reminders of humanity's fallen susceptibility to vanity. In making the connection with the moment in Genesis 3:8 where the eyes of Adam and Eve 'both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons', Lamb may also recall the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Needle-makers. The shield bearing three needles and crowns is supported by a post-lapsarian Adam and Eve, their loins garlanded; the tree of knowledge rises up, encircled by the serpent, its treacherous head turned towards Eve.¹⁴ As in an 1805 letter to the Wordsworths, in which Lamb speculates that 'business [is] the invention of the Old

¹³ Lucas, *Works*, I, 174.

¹⁴ Blazon of the Worshipful Company of Needle-makers, http://www.ngw.nl/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Worshipful_Company_of_Needle-makers. The guild's motto is 'They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons'.

Teazer who persuaded Adam's Master to give him an apron & set him a houghing—', the 'apron' doubles as sign of shame and of uniform of labour.¹⁵

Although the speaker's attitude to the tailors is more of anthropological curiosity than sympathy, the speaker's tone suggests more fellow-feeling when treating the 'sedentary habits' enforced by the tailor's work: 'this sitting for fourteen hours continuously [...] the tailor, in the ordinary pursuance of his art, submits to daily (Sundays excepted) throughout the year, shall we wonder to find the brain affected?'¹⁶ The cross-legged tailor, whose productivity and livelihood depends on a craft that can only be practised when sedentary, has something in common with the East India House clerk—as well as with the part-time author.

The manual and mental actions of the tailor, needleworker and clerk engaged in daily labour are minute, repetitive and monotonous, but they do not account for Lamb's increasing association of work with the wheel, and the action of rotation, in the late 1810s and early 1820s. As I argue, this association helps to explain the intensity of Charles's response to the spinning wheel in Götzenberger's 1827 drawing. The complex of ideas and images is most fully realised in the sonnet 'Work', first published in *The Examiner*, 20 June 1819:

Who first invented work, and bound the free
And holyday-rejoicing spirit down
To the ever-haunting importunity
Of business in the green fields, and the town—
To plough, loom, anvil, spade—and oh! most sad

¹⁵ Marrs, *Letters*, II, 177. Quoted in Aaron, 92.

¹⁶ Lucas, *Works*, I, 175.

To that dry drudgery at the desk's dead wood?
Who but the Being unblest, alien from good,
Sabbathless Satan! he who his unglad
Task ever plies 'mid rotatory burnings,
That round and round incalculably reel—
For wrath divine hath made him like a wheel—
In that red realm from which are no returnings;
Where toiling, and turmoiling, ever and aye
He, and his thoughts, keep pensive working-day.¹⁷

Discussing the sonnet as part of Lamb's 'attack upon the prevailing dissociation of leisure from godliness', Aaron observes that 'The repetitive rotation of mechanical tasks and the Sisyphean control they exert over their human operators are seen, as in Blake's "dark Satanic mills", as ungodly wheels of torture'.¹⁸ The link to Blake's anti-industrial stance is apt, though in fact there are no wheels of torture or rotation in Blake's 'Jerusalem'; a comparison of the two poems suggests rather how much less hope Lamb has of recovering spiritual innocence and freedom 'In England's green and pleasant land'.¹⁹ This longed-for condition is briefly invoked at the opening - 'the free / And holyday-rejoicing spirit' (ll.1-2) - only for its impossibility to be relentlessly enacted through vivid evocations of the 'ever-haunting importunity / Of business' for fallen humanity, and the eternal torment of Satan who, condemned to endless labour and suffering in hell, perpetuates suffering in humanity.

¹⁷ Lucas, *Works*, V, 55-6.

¹⁸ Aaron, *A Double Singleness*, 92, 93.

¹⁹ William Blake, 'And did these feet', Preface to *Milton in Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Fuller, rev. ed. (Harlow, 2008), 295-6, ll.8, 16.

Lamb's representative instruments of tormenting labour reach from archetypal to personal – plough, loom, anvil, spade and desk – but the description of Satan's sufferings turns on a series of metaphorical and existential wheels and mills by which Satan's condition is also an analogy for humanity's eternal 'pensive working-day' in contemporary Britain. While Satan is clearly imagined as occupying hell's 'red realm', the overdetermined and barely controlled 'rotatory' language suggests both that the mental consequences of endless labour are worse than the physical, and that 'Sabbathless Satan' is a cipher for the worker's psychological condition. Satan works "mid rotatory burnings, / That round and round incalculably reel", less because the fires are turning, than because *he* is: God's punishment is to make him 'like a wheel' condemned never to rest. The torment of endless rotation in space is intensified through repetition of a banal term for infinity – 'ever-haunting', 'his unglad / Task ever plies', 'ever and aye' (ll. 3, 9, 13). However, by the closing couplet, the description could equally apply to the modern worker 'bound' in an eternal state of unrewarding labour, where physical 'toiling' produces 'turmoiling'—literally, milling or grinding, but here suggestive of interior turmoil—and 'He, and his thoughts'.

Satan's condition recalls classical myths of eternal punishment (Ixion bound on the ever-spinning fiery wheel), or medieval instruments of torture (the Catherine or 'Breaking' Wheel. However, Lamb could look to contemporary penal practices for an allusion that his readers would immediately recognise in the 'rotatory' imagery of 'Work'. Through the 1810s the engineer William Cubitt had been working on inventing a machine to make use of prisoners' labour. The resulting 'tread-wheel' (more commonly termed a 'treadmill') was first used in a British prison in 1818, initially to create power to grind corn and pump water, but was swiftly adopted in a number of prisons solely as

an instrument of punishment.²⁰ By the time of an 1824 parliamentary ‘Statement Respecting Tread Mills’, 39 gaols or houses of correction (including 3 for women only) had between them 53 treadmills, with wheels that could hold on average 18 or 24 prisoners at one time.²¹ The treadmill was widely discussed in the press and debated in parliament; opponents condemned its cruelty and pointlessness, and its damaging effect on prisoners’ health.²²

Lamb’s awareness of the treadmill, and its resonance with his view of modern working practices, is documented in his ‘Pindaric Ode to the Tread Mill’ published in *The New Times*, 24 October 1825. An imaginative response to Daniel Defoe’s experience of being pilloried in 1703, the ode ironically celebrates ‘the mighty Tread Mill’ as a sign of social progress in order to expose the fallacy of attempting moral improvement through punishing physical labour alone:

Incompetent my song to raise
To its just height thy praise,
Great Mill!
That by thy motion proper
(No thanks to wind, or sail, or working rill)
Grinding that stubborn corn, the Human will,
Turn’st out men’s consciences,
That were begrimed before, as clean and sweet

²⁰ See *Description of the Tread Mill invented by Mr. William Cubitt of Ipswich, for the Employment of Prisoners* (London, 1822).

²¹ ‘Statement Respecting Tread Mills’, 15 April 1824, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:hcpp&rft_dat=xri:hcpp:rec:1824-009119

²² See J. I. Briscoe, *A Letter on the Nature and Effects of the Tread-Wheel, as an instrument of prison labour and punishment, addressed to the Right Hon. Robert Peel* (London, 1824).

As flower from purest wheat,
Into thy hopper.
All reformation short of thee but nonsense is,
Or human, or divine.²³

Pretending to judge the treadmill by its supporters' estimation, the speaker adopts a reductive materialist approach to the problem of moral renovation, and so casts as unrealistic the idea that the process of grinding could transform 'begrimed' and 'stubborn corn' into the 'purest wheat'.

The satirical manner of 'Pindaric Ode to the Tread Mill' seems remote from Götzenberger's angels helping the sleeping spinner, but turning wheels and mills figure repeatedly in Lamb's writings in 1825, the significant year of his retirement from the East India Company on the grounds of certified ill-health. Writing to Bernard Barton on 23 March 1825, he describes the suspense of waiting eight weeks to see if the directors will accept his resignation: 'I am sick of hope deferred. The grand wheel is in agitation that is to turn up my Fortune, but round it rolls and will turn up nothing. I have a glimpse of Freedom, of becoming a Gentleman at large, but I am put off from day to day'.²⁴ The blind goddess Fortuna presides over the wheel of vicissitude, but Lamb's condition of restless stasis cruelly mimics the cycle of the worker's torment. At last, on 29 March, his resignation was accepted. 'The Superannuated Man', published in the *London Magazine*, May 1825, the first Elia essay to appear after his liberation, meditates on the strangeness of liberty after long years of 'sometimes ten hours' a-day attendance

²³ 'Pindaric Ode to the Tread Mill', V, in Lucas, *Works*, V, 73-4.

²⁴ *The Letters of Charles Lamb to whom are added those of his sister Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 3 vols. (London, 1935), II, 463.

at a counting-house'.²⁵ In the original periodical version, the essay's concluding paragraph quotes in full the 1819 sonnet 'Work', framed by familiar motifs:

It is a Lucretian pleasure to behold the poor drudges, whom I have left
behind in the world, carking and caring; like horses in a mill, drudging on in
the same eternal round—and what is it all for?

[...]

['Work']

[...]

A man can never have too much Time to himself, nor too little to do. [...] Man,
I verily believe, is out of his element as long as he is operative. I am
altogether for the life contemplative. Will no kindly earthquake come and
swallow up those accursed cotton mills? Take me that lumber of a desk
there, and bowl it down

As low as to the fiends.²⁶

Just as the speaker attempts to understand his changed condition by revisiting ex-colleagues, Lamb reprints 'Work' as a way of revisiting his past identity as a 'poor drudge', and putting some distance between then and now. The poem becomes proof that miraculous 'returnings' from the hell of work are occasionally possible. However, the reversion to images of clerks 'like horses in a mill [...] in the same eternal round', and the desire to consign the 'accursed cotton mills' and desk to a fiery destruction suggests that the speaker is not yet free of anger at the waste ('what is it all for?').

²⁵ Lucas, *Works*, II, 193.

²⁶ Lucas, *Works*, II, 198; see 427-8 for the full extract.

By May, Lamb's work imagery was moving subtly away from the industrial mill. Writing to Wordsworth, he reflects 'How I look down on the Slaves and drudges of the world! Its inhabitants are a vast cotton-web of spin spin spinners'. While the sense of scale and number still evokes mass production, and the riff on 'spin' mimics a dizzy whirling, these workers are also related to nature's web-spinners – spiders and silkworms. When visitors interrupt Lamb's letter-writing, his thoughts continue in this more creative vein: "Tis these suitors of Penelope that make it necessary to authorise a little for gin and mutton'.²⁷ The contrast of Homeric allusion and gin is designed to amuse, but the shift from spinning to weaving imagery proposes a more constructive model of work: if 'Leadenhall' is the home of the cotton trade's lowly spiders, Lamb is as Penelope in the *Odyssey* weaving her tapestry to keep off unwanted suitors. Penelope may unravel her work by night, but it is craft with a higher purpose.

*

Of the Elia essays, 'Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading', first published in the *London Magazine* in July 1822, contains Charles's most overtly autobiographical allusion to Mary's time as a dressmaker, and the passage most relevant to Götzenberger's scenario:

How beautiful to a genuine lover of reading are the sullied leaves, and worn out appearance [...] of an old 'Circulating Library' Tom Jones, or Vicar of Wakefield! How they speak of the lone sempstress, whom they may have cheered (milliner, or harder-working mantua-maker) after her long day's needle-toil, running far into midnight, when she has snatched an hour, ill

²⁷ Lucas, *Letters*, III, 5.

spared from sleep, to steep her cares, as in some Lethean cup, in spelling out their enchanting contents!²⁸

Urging a reappraisal of much-read, soiled copies of classic novels, the speaker offers a non-standard model of the 'genuine lover of reading'. In this subjective view, the unpromising book evokes vivid images of a needlewoman who privileges the imaginative recreation of reading above the oblivion of sleep (even if, as 'spelling out' implies, her level of literacy means this is effortful). Here 'rotatory' imagery is recuperated as the circulation of cheer and enchantment. The speaker focuses on the pathetic figure of the 'lone sempstress', but also makes a moral discrimination between the milliner's relatively light work, and the dressmaker's demanding labour. When Lamb was writing this essay in 1822, it was seven years since the publication of 'On Needle-work'. However, the source of Lamb's sentimental picture of the seamstress reading in the watches of the night 'to steep her cares, as in some Lethean cup', lies at least twenty-five years earlier. In the protective, empathetic description of a 'harder-working mantua-maker', Lamb recalls the wording and tone of the 26 September 1796 *Morning Chronicle* report on the Coroner's hearing regarding Mary stabbing their mother:

It seems the young Lady had been once before, in her earlier years, deranged, from the harassing fatigues of too much business.—As her carriage towards her mother was ever affectionate in the extreme, it is believed that to the increased attentiveness, which her parents' infirmities

²⁸ Lucas, *Works*, II, ?.

called for by day and night, is to be attributed the present insanity of this ill-fated young woman.²⁹

As Marrs notes, the *Whitehall Evening Post* adds that ‘The above unfortunate young person is a Miss Lamb, a mantua-maker, in Little Queen-Street, Lincoln’s-inn-fields’.³⁰ The sympathetic style of the newspaper narratives – Mary is ‘ill-fated’ and ‘unfortunate’, more victim than perpetrator – as well as the specific details of Mary’s experience of mental illness and affectionate care for her parents suggests family testimony; most likely from Charles (the brother in quest of Dr Pitcairn at the moment of the ‘fatal catastrophe’). There are marked similarities between this description and Lamb’s account of Mary’s state of mind in a letter to Coleridge on 17 October 1796: ‘[I]t is my Sister’s gratifying recollection, that every act of duty & of love she could pay, every kindness (& I speak true, when I say to the hurting of her health, & most probably in great part to the derangement of her senses) thro’ a long course of infirmities & sickness, she could shew her [mother], she ever did’.³¹ As Aaron shows, Lamb’s early years working for the East India Company added to Mary’s pressures: he was out of the house for long hours, and his income was only £30 per year: ‘After Salt’s death in 1792 much of the daughter’s energies must have been consumed in the unremitting requirement not only to earn enough through the mantua-maker’s trade to support the family, but also to attend, daily and nightly, to the nursing needs of the invalid mother and senile father’.³² Mary’s dress-making work was mostly done in the family home, and there were few opportunities for exercise or varied routine. As Lamb wrote to Coleridge on 1 July 1796, ‘My mother is grown so entirely helpless (not having any use of her

²⁹ Extract from *Morning Chronicle*, 26 September 1796, quoted in Marrs, *Letters*, I, 45.

³⁰ Marrs, *Letters*, I, 46.

³¹ Marrs, *Letters*, I, 52.

³² Aaron, *A Double Singleness*, 121.

limbs) that Mary is necessarily confined from ever sleeping out, she being her bed fellow'.³³ The link between the 'lone sempstress' of 'Detached Thoughts' and Götzenberger's sleeping spinner and nurse is strengthened by Lamb's concern to find reading-matter for Mary during her stay at the Islington madhouse. On 28 October he writes, again to Coleridge, that 'I am rather at a loss sometimes for books for her, —our reading is somewhat confined, and we have nearly exhausted our London library. She has her hands too full of work to read much, but a little she must read; for reading was her daily bread'.³⁴ Lamb does not specify the nature of Mary's 'work', but this is common shorthand for women's sewing, as the association with full hands supports. If so, it is striking that Mary continued with her dressmaking while recovering at Islington, whether to complete outstanding orders, to earn money, or simply as an occupation, but reading not paid work is 'her daily bread'.

There are no mantua-makers elsewhere in Charles's published writings, but there are several depictions of women engaged in sewing and spinning. I focus here on two scenes: one from the early romantic novel *Rosamund Gray* (1798), the other from the late dramatic poem, *The Wife's Trial; or, the Intruding Widow* (1831). The distinguishing features of these scenes are: two women are at work; one is dominant, the other subordinate; sewing is associated with hostility or destructiveness; the subordinate woman's self-denial demonstrates her moral superiority. The eponymous heroine of *Rosamund Gray* is usually identified with Ann Simmons, but the first two chapters suggest a curious re-writing of Mary's relationship with their mother. Rosamund devotedly serves her loving, if severe, grandmother, Margaret: 'An old gentlewoman sat spinning in a little arbour at the door of her cottage. She was blind;

³³ Marris, *Letters*, I, 34.

³⁴ Marris, *Letters*, I, 57.

and her granddaughter was reading the Bible to her. The old lady had just left her work, to attend to the story of Ruth'.³⁵ Despite her age and disability, Margaret is productive, and interrupts her work only to listen to a biblical narrative that applies to its reader: in reading aloud of a young woman's loving duty to her mother-in-law, Rosamund expresses her self-subjugation. These dynamics are then dramatised by an episode focused on Rosamund's potential not as a needlewoman, but as artist. For 'three or four months' she has painstakingly worked on an ambitious landscape study; its destruction constitutes a moral test:

One day she went out on a short errand, and left her landscape on the table. When she returned she found it gone.

Rosamund from the first suspected some mischief, but held her tongue. At length she made the fatal discovery. Margaret, in her absence, had laid violent hands on it; not knowing what it was, but taking it for some waste paper, had torn it in half, and with one half of this elaborate composition had twisted herself up — a thread-paper!

Rosamund spread out her hands at sight of the disaster, gave her grandmother a roguish smile, but said not a word. She knew the poor soul would only fret, if she told her of it, — and when once Margaret was set a fretting for other people's misfortunes, the fit held her pretty long.³⁶

Written still under the long shadow of Mary's matricide, if considered as a fictive re-casting of Mary Lamb's relation to her mother, the episode stages the dutiful daughter's

³⁵ Lucas, *Works*, I, 1.

³⁶ Lucas, *Works*, I, 6.

mild, self-repressive response to the thwarting of her desire for creative expression. The mother-figure's aggression is unintentional, but the narrator's extreme language suggests how Rosamund experiences it: as a 'fatal discovery' and 'disaster', where the sight of her artwork destroyed simply to store sewing thread evokes the image of her grandmother 'la[y]ing violent hands' upon it. In Lamb's recuperative fantasy, old Margaret spins the thread of life like the first of the three Fates, Clotho, and is blind like Fortune with her wheel, but is herself at the mercy of chance. Instead of Mary being driven beyond endurance and sanity, a 'roguish smile' is the only fleeting sign of Rosamund's frustration; not only does she spare her grandmother knowledge of 'the mischief she had unconsciously done', with patience, forgiveness, but also determination, Rosamund immediately 'began another piece of the same size and subject'.

Written several years after 'Angel Help', *The Wife's Trial* presents the trial of happily married, timid Katherine Selby, forced to suffer the tyrannical behaviour of her ex-school-fellow, the blackmailing house-guest Mrs Frampton. Mrs. Frampton exercises her power over Katherine, most obviously by reversing their roles and behaving as though she is mistress and Katherine maidservant. In one scene, the ostensibly harmoniously domestic activity of two women sewing is a cover for bullying. The scene is set in 'Mrs. Selby's Chamber', with the direction 'MRS. FRAMPTON, KATHERINE, working'.³⁷ It is understood that for genteel women, this can only mean needlework, but here the work is not to benefit the household at large, but to feed Mrs. Frampton's vanity and damaged pride (in a previous scene she declares 'I must go trim myself: this humbled garb would shame a wedding feast'). In this she recalls the stock figure of 'the vain late eighteenth-century aristocrat, who, it was presumed, sewed only to adorn

³⁷ Lucas, *Works*, V, 252.

herself for a life of parties and dissipation'.³⁸ If old Margaret evokes Clotho, Mrs. Frampton resembles Lachesis, who measures the thread of life,. Indeed, Mrs. Frampton consciously invokes the Fates:

MRS. FRAMPTON

I am thinking, child, how contrary our fates
Have traced our lots through life. Another needle,
This works untowardly. An heiress born
To splendid prospects, at our common school
I was as one above you all, not of you;
[...]

—Not that needle, simple one,
With the great staring eye fit for a Cyclops!
Mine own are not so blinded with their griefs
But I could make a shift to thread a smaller.
A cable or a camel might go through this,
And never strain for the passage.

KATHERINE I will fit you.—
Intolerable tyranny! [*Aside.*]

MRS. FRAMPTON Quick, quick;

³⁸ Carol Shiner Wilson, 'Lost Needles, Tangled Threads: Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor, and Lamb', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia, 1994), 166-190 (168).

You were not once so slack.—³⁹

The request for 'Another needle' is rudely peremptory, as though to a 'child', as she terms her host, or to the 'separate maid' who served her at school. The intruding widow's rude dissatisfaction with Katherine's 'housewife' or sewing box is designed to humiliate. Katherine offers the wrong needle and responds slowly because she is pained and upset. Mrs Frampton's allusions to the fates, Cyclops and cables and camels show her to be an educated woman who uses her knowledge in barbed wit. She alludes to the words of Jesus in Matthew, 19.21-24: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God'; the incongruous pairing of camel and needle has long been explained as a mistranscription of the Greek *kamilos*, meaning rope or cable, as *kamêlos*, camel. However, Mrs Frampton is so keen to show off her sharp wit and sharp eyes that she misses the moral applicability to her own boasting about her past, and the plot to regain wealth through blackmail. For Lamb, the needle, like the spinning wheel with its spindle, does indeed 'work untowardly'.

*

Drawing on these varied contexts, I now turn to Lamb's poem responding to the drawing of a sleeping spinner assisted by angels:

This rare Tablet doth include
Poverty with Sanctitude.-
Past midnight this Poor Maid hath spun,
And yet the Work not half is done,
Which must supply from earnings scant

³⁹ Lucas, *Works*, V, 252.

A feeble bed-rid Parent's want.
Her sleep-charg'd eyes exemption ask,
And Holy Hands take up the task;
Unseen the Rock and Spindle ply,
And do her earthly drudgery.

Saintly Poor One, sleep, sleep on,
And waking find thy labours done.

Perchance she knows it by her dreams;
Her eye hath caught the golden gleams,
Angelic Presence testifying,
Which round her everywhere are flying:
Ostents, from which she may presume,
That much of Heaven is in the room.
Skirting her own bright hair they run,
And to the Sunny add more Sun:
Now on that Aged Face they fix,
Streaming from the Crucifix,
The flesh-clogg'd Spirit disabusing,
Death-disarming sleeps infusing,
Prelibations, foretastes high—
And equal thoughts to Live or Die.
Gardener bright from Eden's Bower,
Tend with care that Lily Flower:
To its roots and leaves infuse

Heaven's sunshine, Heaven's dews.
'Tis a Type, and 'tis a Pledge,
Of a Crowning Privilege.
Careful as that Lilly Flower,
This Maid must keep her precious Dower;
Live a Sainted Maid, or die
Martyr to Virginitie.

Virtuous Poor Ones, sleep, sleep on,
And waking find your labours done.

Charles Lamb.—

James T. Wills accepts Lamb's view of the priority of 'sanctitude' in the picture, but sees visual evidence for 'humble circumstances' rather than actual want, and argues that 'Lamb's emphasis on poverty not only provides an added appreciation for the devotion of the Maid and the poignancy of the scene, but also serves to create a firm justification for the angelic visitation'.⁴⁰ Despite the word's prominent position, Lamb does not explicitly characterise the scene in relation to 'Work' (l. 4). According to his reading of the scenario, despite working late into the night, the young woman still has most of her work to finish. Seeing no evidence of other family to contribute to household income, he infers that the maid's 'earnings scant' must keep them both – though only the 'feeble bed-ridden Parent's want' is acknowledged. This implies the maid's self-denying character, as does the fact that 'Her sleep-charg'd eyes exemption ask' (l. 7; my emphasis) only when she is overcome by exhaustion: she would not complain or ask to be spared. By

⁴⁰ Wills, 'New Lamb Material', 411.

the end of the first verse paragraph, 'Holy Hands' have relieved her of 'her earthly drudgery' (ll. 8, 10), and the refrain directly reassures the maid that a miracle *is* happening: she can sleep safe in the knowledge that her work will be finished when she wakes up. For the worker who even when not engaged in toil is troubled by 'turmoiling' thoughts of endless tasks, this is an impossible dream. The picture's status as a potent wish-fulfilment fantasy is acknowledged by the refrains (ll. 11-12, 37-8), which anticipate the worker's disbelief.

The fantasy is enabled in part by the conventions and style of the sixteenth-century German or Northern Netherlandish religious art recalled in the drawing, which displace the figure of the exhausted worker to an idiom and time in which miracles are more plausible. This is emphasised in the short note that Lamb attached to all published versions of 'Angel Help':

Suggested by a drawing in the possession of Charles Aders, Esq., in which is represented the Legend of a poor female Saint; who, having spun past midnight, to maintain a bed-ridden mother, has fallen asleep from fatigue, and Angels are finishing her work. In another part of the chamber, an Angel is tending a lily, the emblem of purity.⁴¹

The sacred subject affirms the possibility of supernatural intervention in the lives of 'Virtuous Poor Ones' (l. 37) through the 'Angelic Presence' and the 'golden gleams' (ll. 14-15) streaming from the wall-mounted crucified Christ, and from the hand of the angel on the left. Similarly, the chronological displacement suggested by the heavy carved furniture, and anachronistic style of objects such as the oil lamp, bottle and

⁴¹ Lucas, *Works*, V, 48.

simple spinning wheel locates the scene several centuries in the past. Lamb honours this by using verbal archaisms: a 'Tablet' as a stiff paper or wood surface for writing or drawing; the antique hand-held 'Rock and Spindle' to denote the spinning wheel; 'Ostents' meaning 'portents', 'Prelibations' is glossed in the poem as 'foretastes' (ll. 1, 9, 17, 25). However, the supernatural elements are also treated with comparative realism. The angels' divine status is not signalled by a stylised halo, the wings of the pair engaged in spinning are soberly folded, and they are presented as practical, corporeal beings capable of 'earthly drudgery'. As befits its duty tending the abstraction virginity, the angel on the left is more ethereal: it hovers rather than stands, wings raised in flight – but the miraculous has been domesticated, familiarised.

Lamb's investment in the fantasy of liberation from work is reinforced by the opening eight lines of the second verse paragraph, where the speaker speculates that the sleeper 'knows it by her dreams' (l. 13). This is partly prompted by the 'Poor Maid's' peaceful expression. Lamb also seeks to show the reader through prolepsis the spinner's delight on waking – 'expanding the visual suggestions', as Wills has it, of what Lamb called the 'Complex Scene given to the eye at once'.⁴² However, the idea that the worker is not only relieved of 'earthly drudgery', but also is actively aware of the 'Angelic Presence' doing good while she sleeps, furthers the wish-fulfilment. The simple rest of unconsciousness is not enough to prove her credentials as 'a Sainted Maid' (l. 35): the spinner must have visionary awareness 'That Much of Heaven is in the room', and that her waking duty and care are rewarded.

The poem's preoccupation with a worker's dream of being free to 'sleep, sleep on, / And waking find your labours done' (ll. 11-12, 37-8) is more explicable when

⁴² Charles Lamb to Charles Aders, April 1827, MS Eng 1094, fol. 23, quoted in Wills, 'New Lamb Material', 410.

considered in the light of the symbolism of the wheel, and Mary's relationship with her mother. The word 'wheel' does not appear in the poem, but was in Lamb's mind: he considered replacing 'Rock and Spindle' with 'wheel and distaff'. He kept the more poetic formula because it 'sounds best', but the drawing offers iconographic wheels to trigger Lamb's association of work with the 'rotatory'.⁴³ Most obvious in the centre foreground is the darkly shadowed Saxony spinning wheel, symbol of endless labour and the vicissitudes of fate, the shape of the winding wheel echoed in the smaller reel. There is also a circular screen on the table, which shields the face of the sleeping parent, but also frames the light from the lamp. The spokes of the spinning wheel are similarly recalled in the face of the modern clock that shows the late night hour (five minutes to one o'clock), its swinging pendulum signalling time passing. Perhaps most strikingly, in the left-hand part of the scene presided over by the angel tending the Maid's purity, is another machine necessary for the Maid's work: half-hidden behind the chest of drawers is a 'spinner's weasel' or clock-wheel, a yarn-winding tool used for measuring yarn into skeins.⁴⁴ The clock-wheel is not mentioned in the poem, but in conjunction with the other wheels that compositionally frame or hem in the sleeping figure, it helps to form an iconography of incessant work that stimulates Lamb's investment in the fantasy of divine intervention to relieve the worker.

To return to the picture as an analogy for Mary Lamb's relationship with their mother Elizabeth, the poem registers the 'Poor Maid's' duty towards the 'feeble bed-ridden Parent' in the practical terms of working to earn money, eliding the care-giver role suggested by the medicine bottle, cup and spoon. The speaker's interest is in the effect that the heavenly 'golden gleams' have on the two figures' interiority: they brighten the

⁴³ *Letters*, Lucas, III, 86.

⁴⁴ Eileen Chadwick, *The Craft of Hand Spinning* (New York, 1980), 78-80.

'Maid's' dreams and prospects, while removing the Parent's fear of death. The final passage concerning the angel and the lily fixates on the Maid's virginity or 'precious Dower' as a pledge of her chaste marriage with Christ. The angel is a 'Gardener bright from Eden's Bower' – a visitor from a prelapsarian innocent Eden, unlike her earthbound sisters working at the wheel. In Lamb's reading, the price of angelic ministrations is that the young woman remain a spinster, in the dual sense of the designation of her occupation as a spinner, and the legal designation of an unmarried woman: 'Live a Sainted Maid, or die / Martyr to Virginity' (ll. 35-6).⁴⁵ While this destiny is congruent with 'the Legend of a poor female Saint', it may also be understood in relation to the Lambs' family history. The setting of the nocturnal bed-chamber, the human family reduced to the psychodrama's essential participants – archetypes of the hard-working daughter and bed-ridden mother – allows the picture to be read as an idealisation of Mary and Elizabeth Lamb imagined before Mary's matricide – with a different outcome. Whereas in the weeks and months that culminated in the events of 22 September 1796 Lamb had been able to do little to relieve Mary of her physical and psychological burdens as primary carer, needlewoman and earner, the figures of the three angels make it possible to imagine a peaceful death for the parent, and devoted spinsterhood – and liberty from labour – for the surviving daughter. The consoling fiction of the poem published under the title 'Angel Help' is possible only at a distance of more than thirty years, encoded in a poetic response to a drawing, in which the historically-specific Miss Lamb, mantua-maker, of Little Queen-Street, is disguised as the spinner, an archetypal woman-worker.

*

⁴⁵ *OED Online*, s.v. 'spinster', 1.a, 2.a.

When Lamb sent Mary's poem to Elizabeth Aders, his covering note stated, with dry understatement, that 'my sister has tried her hand upon the same subject, but with a slight shade of difference in the handling of it'.⁴⁶ Where Lamb stages a fantasy of divine intervention to relieve a female homeworker of monotonous, mechanical, manual labour, Mary's poem 'takes a satirical look both at the drawing and Charles's reading of it':⁴⁷

Another version of the Same

Lazy-bones, Lazy-bones, wake up, and peep:
The Cat's in the Cup-board, your Mother's asleep:
There you sit snoring, forgetting her ills:
Who is to give her her bolus & pills?
Twenty fine Angels must come into town,
All for to help you to make your new gown;
Dainty aerial Spinsters & Singers:
Aren't you asham'd to employ such white fingers—
Delicate hands, unaccustom'd to reels,
To set 'em a spinning at poor bodies' wheels?
Why they came down is to me all a riddle,
And left Hallelujah broke off in the middle;
Jove's Court, and the Presence Angelical, cut,
To eke out the work of a lazy young Slut.

⁴⁶ Houghton 1094.24; Wills 412.

⁴⁷ Wills, 411.

Angel-duck, Angel-duck, winged, and silly,
Pouring a watering pot over a Lily;
Gardener gratuitous, careless of pelf;
Leave her to water her Lilly herself;
Or to neglect it to death, if she chuse it:
Remember, the loss is her own if she lose it.

Mary Lamb.

Lamb's poem is voiced predominantly in the third-person, with occasional deictic gestures ('This rare Tablet', 'this Poor Maid') to bring the 'legend' closer to home, and use of the vivid present tense for immediacy, but restricted use of direct address for the two refrains and invocation to the 'Gardener' (ll. 11-12, 37-8 and 27-30). By contrast, Mary uses direct address throughout, with the first fourteen lines dedicated to reproaching the young woman for neglect, selfishness, and vanity (the speaker queries why the angels bother coming down from heaven at all), then the last five lines to admonishing the angel with the bathetic 'watering pot' that her care is misguided: care for virginity can only be the young woman's responsibility. Where Charles's maid did not ask 'exemption' from incessant labour, 'Lazy-bones' is barracked for lacking self-reliance. If Mary saw any correspondence to her own history either in the drawing, or in Charles's sober, intensely tender response, there is little trace. The omission may be interpreted as repression and denial, or as indirect evidence of her own good conscience, 'that every act of duty & of love [...] every kindness [...] she could shew her,

she ever did'.⁴⁸ The young woman should do her duty tirelessly, as she, Mary, had done – the dire consequences for her mother and for her own mental health are entirely repressed.

'Another version' acknowledges that the human subjects are 'poor bodies' (l. 10), but also evinces Mary's trenchant scepticism about either the appropriateness of divine intervention for their circumstances, or the likelihood of relieving a woman worker from her duties. She uses a series of techniques to undermine 'Angel Help': nonsense reversals (Charles says 'sleep on', she says 'wake up'); parody (Charles's 'Angelic Presence' in the room becomes the 'Presence Angelical' abandoned at 'Jove's Court'); bathos (the 'Poor Maid's' dream-filled sleep becomes 'sit[ting] snoring'); and comic exaggeration (twenty angels for Charles's three), which successfully satirise their subject, while also deterring the reader from taking her poem too seriously. However, she also makes a positive assertion of the imperative nature of earthly tasks: Lamb's cherished reprieve from endless work is recast as laziness, thoughtlessness, vanity, selfishness, and poor housekeeping. Instead Mary presents moral and domestic responsibility as a positive form of female agency: the sleeping daughter should be taking care of her mother, making her own clothes, protecting her own virginity – else deserve name-calling. The verse paragraph addressed to the sleeping spinner begins 'Lazy-bones' and ends 'lazy young Slut' – though of course the 'Angel-duck' does not escape this treatment. Mary may be resistant to male artists' and writers' tendency to idealise and aestheticize young women and angels, but her resistance to one objectionable stereotype of femininity does not prevent her from perpetuating another. Mary exploits the inherent incongruity of Götzenberger's subject – divine intervention in a mild domestic difficulty – but also implicitly scorns the likelihood of assistance for

⁴⁸ Marris, *Letters*, I, 52.

the lower-class working woman, whether from heaven or closer at hand. The woman must take responsibility for herself and her household because if she does not, who will? Strikingly, the differentiation of the working woman from the 'Twenty fine Angels' recalls the class-awareness of 'On Needlework'. The 'Dainty aerial Spinners' with their 'white fingers' and 'Delicate hands' (ll.7-9) resemble the middle- and upper-middle class readers of the *British Lady's Magazine*, who should direct their energies to wiser ends than occupying the time with plain sewing and fancy work, and instead give employment to the 'industrious sisterhood' of professional needleworkers.⁴⁹ Here, the spinning wheel is almost proudly defined as belonging to the working woman: angels should not be set 'spinning at *poor bodies*' wheels' (my emphasis). The speaker of 'Another version' proposes that the drawing and 'Angel Help' romanticise women's lot, that female labour should be defined in terms of dignity rather than monotony, and its abrasive manner pours scorn on the fantasy of sleeping on the job, 'And waking [to] find your labours done'. It is, however, a touch of irony that Mary's spirited defence of female industry ends up in an art patron's album, status symbol of elite leisured female culture.

University of Bristol

⁴⁹ Sempronia' [Mary Lamb], 'On Needle-work', *British Lady's Magazine*, 4 (April 1815), 257-260 (257).