

WHEN WILLIAM MET MARY: THE REWRITING OF MARY LAMB'S
AND WILLIAM-HENRY IRELAND'S STORIES IN PETER ACKROYD'S
THE LAMBS OF LONDON

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ABSTRACT

Peter Ackroyd's London novels represent a distinctive component in his project of composing a literary-historical biography of the city. Understanding London as a multi-layered palimpsest of texts, Ackroyd adds to this ongoing process by rewriting the city's history from new, imaginative perspectives. For this he employs approaches and strategies such as parody, pastiche, genre mixture, metafiction, intertextuality and an incessant mixing of the factual with the fictitious. The aim of this article is to explore the various ways in which he toys with historical reality and blurs the borderline between fiction and biography in *The Lambs of London* (2004), offering thus an alternative rendering of two unrelated offences connected with late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London literary circles: Mary Lamb's matricide and William-Henry Ireland's forgeries of the Shakespeare Papers.

I had a sister –
The devil kist her,
And raised a blister!
Charles Lamb

1. Introduction

Peter Ackroyd's most ambitious literary-historical project is to compose a biography of London, to reconstruct the city through the texts it has created, allowed to be created, incited, or inspired. Ackroyd himself admits that it is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task to accomplish, as the city is infinite and illimitable in the sense that it "goes beyond any boundary or convention. It con-

tains every wish or word ever spoken, every action or gesture ever made, every harsh or noble statement ever expressed” (Ackroyd 2003: 760). Such a project is also challenging because it cannot and must not be limited to a chronological ordering of written documents, and Ackroyd challenges traditional notions of linear time “in favour of a circular, or mythical conception of time”, which is characteristic for the “interchangeability of characters and circularity of the events” (Onega 1998: 45). A chronological understanding of time, Ackroyd suggests, is insufficient to comprehend the complex relationship between London and its texts, which often moves and evolves in circles or otherwise recurrent temporal patterns, as a result of which the city’s biography “defies chronology ... itself forming a labyrinth” (Ackroyd 2003: 2). The labyrinthine, ludicrous, paradoxical and therefore often perplexing character of this relationship also affects the trajectory of its tracings – sooner or later it strays and grows wayward and quixotic, as the individual writings not only support and complement, but also contradict, question or even deny one another. The strategy he adopts in *London: The biography* (2000) is to approach such a project thematically by juxtaposing and confronting a great variety of texts written on a particular aspect or phenomenon concerning the historical development of the city, be it social, economic, political or cultural.

A list of such themes must inevitably be selective and Ackroyd deliberately chooses those which have proved to be most fruitful in inspiring people to write, even though they are not usually made part of the city’s “official” history, such as criminality, voraciousness and magic. Ackroyd’s novels thus exemplify the two defining elements Nick Bentley identifies in a contemporary historical fiction’s emphasis on the relationship between private and official history: “a concentration on alternative, marginalized and unofficial experiences that offered alternative and often competing perspectives on official histories” marked by “an interest in underworld and carnivalesque narratives”, and “a focus on narratives of violence, catastrophe and war” (Bentley 2005: 12). These particular aspects and phenomena are written about again and again, by different people, with different aims, for different purposes and from different perspectives. They are thus incessantly rewritten, new versions being inscribed onto previous ones, transforming themselves into an ongoing process of forming a network of mutually overlapping texts, a palimpsest. Ackroyd acknowledges the metaphor of the city as a historical palimpsest of texts, one laid upon another, whose perpetual interactions constitute the very dynamism of London’s literary history. “The city’s topography is a palimpsest within which all the most magnificent or monstrous cities of the world can be discerned. It has been the home of both angels and devils striving for mastery. It has been the seat of miracles, and the harbour of savage paganism. Who can fathom the depths of London?” (Ackroyd 2003: 753-754). In the New Historicist manner he then attempts to reveal as

many of these layers as possible, to explore how they relate one to another and to their contemporaneous socio-historical reality, and consequently, perhaps, to discover something that they do not seem to convey in themselves, sharing the view that “[s]ocial actions are themselves always embedded in systems of public signification, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation, while the words that constitute the works of literature ... are by their very nature the manifest assurance of a similar embeddedness” (Greenblatt 1980: 5).

However, Ackroyd goes even further and in his novels offers his own contributions to this process by rewriting the city’s history through his alternative versions of selected past events, his “could-have-been” stories that, based on a combination of the factual and the fictitious, always balance on the thin edge between historiography and playful speculation.

Ackroyd plays constantly: within a given text, across his own texts, and between the texts which his name signs and those to which he alludes, from which he cites or otherwise borrows, often wittily, with knowing gestures of pastiche and parody, as much from a sense of fun or jest as out of a sense of respect and inheritance. He plays quite seriously between the conventional constraints of the novel and biography, so as to interanimate and contaminate the genres respectively

(Gibson-Wolfreys 2000: 9).

Having been peopled with both fictional and real-life personalities, and having their plots revolve around real as well as fictional historical events, his novels contain a world where the boundaries between fact and fiction get blurred for the sake of the stories’ readability and attractiveness, though at the expense of the fact that such “fabulation or Gothic repetition, ... uncanny historical echoes or rhymes of earlier events, and apparent transhistorical identities of characters separated by centuries, destabilise historical reality” (Robinson 2011: 31), and thus challenge “any sense of stable historical perspective, privileging the imaginative recreation of historiographical fiction over the authoritarian nature of empirical historicity” (Murray 2007: 85). Moreover, what has been said about the characters and events also applies to the texts which often play a crucial role within the novels’ plots. Most of these are authentic but some are made up for purposes of the narrative. Most of Ackroyd’s London novels thus follow, by slightly different and less scholarly means, the pattern suggested in his biography of London – they re-enact the city’s past through a palimpsestic layering of texts, discourses and narratives concerning selected events or personalities. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how this approach proves essential for the narrative framework of *The Lambs of London* (2004) and how the novel “communicates” with other Ackroyd works as well as with other texts dealing with the events depicted in this novel.

2. The historical novel as a palimpsest of London crimes

Some of Ackroyd's favourite London themes are criminality and violence committed in the city and their textual representations. In the chapters "A rogues gallery" and "Horrible murder" of *London: The biography* Ackroyd refers to several texts which sought both to record and bring to life the city's greatest crimes, including Thomas de Quincey's *On murder considered as one of the fine arts* (1827). Ackroyd shows that all these texts have contributed to the immortality of the crimes in question. All the written records of London criminality demonstrate how deeply rooted violent crimes are in the very texture of the city and its inhabitants' minds. Therefore, the most frequently depicted events in Ackroyd's London novels are various crimes, notably murders and other homicidal offences. The motif and strategy of an event in London's history presented through, among other narrative means, a palimpsestic network of mutually interacting texts is probably most forcefully employed in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), where these texts refer to or rewrite the famous Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811.¹

In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* Ackroyd takes de Quincey's celebrated essay as a central text that affects most of the story's protagonists' fates: young George Gissing in the Reading Room of the British Museum reads de Quincey's work, admiring his ability to romanticise the deplorable killing monster, and takes it as an inspiration for his own essay "Romanticism and Crime"; sitting next to Gissing, John Cree is studying de Quincey while musing on his own work, a social drama about the misery of the London poor; then there are various newspaper interpretations of the murders and speculations concerning the perpetrator's identity, creating a myth of a killing Golem, which form an independent, fictitious narrative of the mystery. Ackroyd also reproduces extracts from the recordings of the fictitious interrogations and trial of Elizabeth Cree, which lends his story an air of greater historical accuracy and authenticity. Most importantly, Elizabeth Cree is not only inspired by the account of the Ratcliffe Highway murders in the plotting of her own murderous schemes, she further develops the idea of the killer as artist and forges her husband's diary, in which she often quotes de Quincey's words, in order to pin the blame on him. This faked diary represents an artistic enterprise of its own kind, since it combines psychological explorations of the murderer's mind with elements of a detective thriller, a narrative strategy which is becoming increasingly popular in contemporary crime fiction and which can be labelled "criminal mind style" (Gregoriou 2007: 70-78). Ackroyd thus contributes to this palimpsest by creating his own crime narrative in the form of a confrontation of the failed process

¹ For the sake of the narrative, Ackroyd moves these murders on in time into 1812.

of investigation, which involves several historical personalities such as Gissing, Dan Leno and Karl Marx, and the diary supposedly kept by the fictional serial killer.

Another example of Ackroyd's fictitious, or at least semi-fictitious, re-enactment of a famous London murder is the unfortunate life-story of Mary Lamb in *The Lambs of London*. In 1796, Mary Lamb, who had previously suffered a mental breakdown, killed her mother with a kitchen knife, probably in a fit caused by the long-lasting strain of caring for her family, as a result of which she had to be kept under permanent supervision for the rest of her life. Her younger brother, Charles Lamb, became her guardian, the siblings lived together and later they even adopted an orphan. They collaborated on several books for children, including the most famous, *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). Ackroyd's novel depicts the time that preceded this tragic event, roughly between December 1794, when the first documents forged by William Ireland appeared, and the murder in September 1796. As with his other historical novels, he brings together a variety of really existing and fictional characters – apart from the Lambs and their parents, there are other historical personages such as Thomas de Quincey, who at this point is struggling to write his first contributions to literary magazines, William Ireland and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, though his depiction is not entirely historically accurate as de Quincey was in reality only eleven years old at the time of the murder and Ireland, on the contrary, some two years older than in Ackroyd's version. However, as Ireland always claimed to be two years younger than he was² and as it is only Ireland who mentions his age in the novel, Ackroyd in fact does not deviate from historical reality in this case.³ *The Lambs of London* skillfully portrays a late eighteenth century London of eager entrepreneurs, doubting scholars and irresponsible bohemian artists, a promising yet merciless urban world of ambition and hope, but also of failure and disappointment, an environment that puts enough pressure on an aspiring young writer to drive him or her to resort to crime in order to fulfill his/her dreams.

The basis of the novel's story is formed by the gripping depiction of the three main protagonists' personalities – Charles Lamb, his sister Mary and William Ireland. Charles is a young man in his early twenties who nourishes the dream of becoming a professional writer and sends his essays, with varying success, to several periodicals. In the meantime, to support his family he works

² Ireland always strived to emphasize how very young he was when he accomplished the forgeries of Shakespeare's literary genius (Pierce 2004: 21).

³ Such deliberate manipulation with precise historical data is Ackroyd's favourite game with the reader, he does something similar, for instance, with Dan Leno in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, and with Nicholas Dyer/Hawksmoor in *Hawksmoor* where he "mistakes" the years of birth of the eponymous personages.

as a clerk for the British East India Company, which bores him, and he seeks distraction in drinking with his colleagues or just by himself. Doubtful about his writing talent and frustrated by a job that does not fulfill him, Charles gets frequently moody, sinking easily from enthusiasm to sulkiness. Being eleven years her brother's senior, Mary is already past her marrying age and so she lives with her parents, helping her mother run the household, an activity for which she never receives appreciation from the other family members. She finds rare moments of happiness in reading and looking after her irresponsible brother. As a disregarded, introverted, insecure and solitary person she proves mentally vulnerable and prone to set her heart on whoever seems to show some concern for her little world. William Ireland, a youth of seventeen, is the least decipherable of the three. Equipped with gentlemanly manners and, for his age, a remarkable gift for handling the language, he manages to disguise his true character under a polished surface of polite kindheartedness. Hoping in vain for his writing to be published and acknowledged, feeling he is wasting his potential as a bookseller, envious of the success of others, his confidence further bruised by his father's dismissal of his talent and aspirations, the pragmatically unscrupulous Ireland is ready in his desperate ambition to make use of the Lambs for his own purposes.

However, Ackroyd's central aim in the novel is to offer an alternative version of the murder, to rewrite existing accounts from a fresh, though largely speculative and fabricated, perspective. For this purpose he adds the criminal dimension to his story: Charles Lamb gets robbed on his way home from a pub, two respectable clerics sexually abuse a Negro crossing-sweeper boy, and, most importantly, William Ireland forges Shakespeare's works. Moreover, there are newspaper reports of recently committed crimes in London, one of which, the murder of an elderly laundress whose killer has yet not been caught, Charles reads aloud to his sister, jokingly informing her that "[c]ities are places of death" and that he "read recently that the first cities were built upon graveyards" (Ackroyd 2005: 193),⁴ unable to realize how disturbing such teasing might be for her oversensitive and unstable psyche. Together with the tense, rigid situation in the Lambs' household, Ackroyd constructs a London as a web of miscellaneous crime narratives, and thus evokes an omnipresent atmosphere of physical, social and emotional suffocation with violence and murder in the wind, a sinister urban milieu in which "Mrs. Lamb becomes a sacrificial victim to the innate violence of the city" (Lewis 2007: 139). By connecting the two famous yet fundamentally dissimilar offences, Mary Lamb's matricide, the true circumstances of which are still rather shrouded in mystery, and William Ireland's relatively well-recorded literary forgery, which substantially differ in their nature as well as in their social and legal consequences and implications, Ackroyd

⁴ Henceforth, *The Lambs of London* will be referred to as *LL* in parentheses after quotes.

composes another layer of the palimpsest composed of numerous attempts to provide their plausible and historically accurate narrative accounts.

3. Forgery! Murder! Forgery and murder!

The Lambs of London proves Ackroyd's gift for creating strong, exciting and, despite all the author's proclamations and editorial notes, enticingly believable stories and characters. The central motif associated with all the story's major protagonists and, at the same time, the crucial means through which their fates become intertwined is that of loneliness and isolation within the bustling life of the populated metropolis and the resulting feeling of frustration and despair, hinting at "Ackroyd's identification of cities with labyrinths" which "reinforces the interaction of these two characters as in some way localized, or disconnected from the metropolis as a whole" (Phillips 2011: 19). Due to her social status and position as an unmarried woman, Mary Lamb is doomed to conform to the role of the dutiful daughter who rarely goes out into the city unaccompanied and remains for most of her time closed in the household she is supposed to look after, in the uninspiring company of her scornful and narrow-minded mother and the elderly, uneducated maid. There she feels "buried alive" (LL: 10), detached from the literary world of spiritual and intellectual stimuli she so much longs to be a part of. "The city is a great jakes" (LL: 1), she notes sadly, referring to how the city, despite the immense opportunities it offers, thwarts all her hopes and aspirations. She thus only lives through her independent reading and studying, the effects of which she shares with her brother, whose frequent departures from the house provoke in her "the strangest mixture of anger and loneliness" (LL: 11).

Charles Lamb fails to notice, not to mention understand, his sister's unhappiness as he is too preoccupied with his own worries and insecurities, namely those concerning his aspiration to become a respectable and successful writer. Doing a job he does not like, and striving hard to get his writing published by following editors' demands and composing essays on subjects that do not interest him in the least, his frustration deepens as he fears his literary talent is not exploited properly and he might never receive recognition from London's literary circles. In order to escape disappointing reality, he spends most evenings drinking with his colleagues or alone, coming home drunk and sinking into oblivion as soon as his sister puts him to bed. As a result, even the more fortunate of the two siblings in terms of life opportunities often finds himself alone with his troubles and anxieties about having "no vision to sweep him past all the difficulties and disappointments of the literary life" (LL: 127). Once again, the city becomes a metaphor and the cornerstone of one's ability to survive in the modern bustling world: although the outwardly cheerful and

confident Charles claims himself “always lucky in the London streets”, leading “a charmed life in the city” (*LL*: 47), there are occasions for the inwardly insecure and self-doubting Charles “when it merely reinforce[s] his sense of failure” (*LL*: 28). Similarly, William Ireland is also a loner, one whose personality and life bear similarities to the Lambs: in terms of his, age, ambition and social status he is very like Charles Lamb, but unlike the more conventional and patient Lamb Ireland is much more discontented with his lot and refuses to “accept his youth and anonymity as handicaps” (Stewart 2010: 53). Moreover, with a sensitivity, politeness and refined manners uncommon for a person of his age and social background, he is, like Mary, an old-fashioned figure, as if born out of his time, largely misunderstood, underestimated or even ignored, both in his own family as well as by the other literary aspirants; and, though much less successful than Charles because of the class prejudice of the literati, his chief ambition is to become an acknowledged author despite the adversities of fate. Like Mary, Ireland thus lives in a forced, turned voluntary, isolation, yet in his case spiritual and mental rather than physical and social, and, like Charles, he sees the opportunities London offers, yet, simultaneously, he is well aware that the city can easily dash all his hopes.

In conceiving his story, Ackroyd makes use of the fact that very little is known about the true circumstances surrounding Mary Lamb’s murder of her mother, as all the people involved “consciously kept private any information they had regarding Mary’s actions and state of mental health”, and that “[e]ven the public record lacks a clear indication of the steps taken to extricate Mary Lamb from any painful legal consequences” (Hitchcock 2005: 18). The absence of any reliable piece of evidence concerning what precisely preceded the fatal afternoon of 22 September, 1796 thus leaves room for various speculations built around a few firm facts which, however, prove insufficient in fully explaining what prompted the otherwise mild and docile daughter to commit her violent act. On the other hand, more is known about the events that followed the trial: the matricide was deemed a manifestation of the perpetrator’s lunacy and she was not confined to a prison or a mental hospital. Her brother was designated her guardian and she lived under his gentle care and supervision “as freely and productively as a woman of her time and temperament could expect – maybe even more so” (Hitchcock 2005: 19). Mary shared not only her brother’s home, but also his friends and literary career, and with his love and help created a happy and productive life for herself, outliving him by more than twelve years and dying at the blessed age of eighty-two, despite the recurrent periods of deep depression which immobilized her for several months of nearly every year. Though practically self-educated, as she received only basic education and her parents probably prepared her for a life of service (for instance, she learned Latin, which helped her overcome the feeling of intellectual inadequacy gained

in her childhood, only when she was in her forties) (Watson 2004: 34, 31-32); she, together with her brother, presided over an informal but influential literary circle or salon which included such prominent writers and intellectuals as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt and Godwin (Watson 2004: 3-4).

Their father died in 1799, which was something of a relief for Charles, not only because John Lamb had been mentally incapacitated since suffering a serious stroke around 1792, but mainly because Mary could then move in with her brother and the two siblings lived in what Charles called “double singleness” (Hitchcock 2005: 20), in which state he gradually developed a taste for bachelorhood (Hitchcock 2005: 94), until his death in 1834. Yet, even these events, though they are only briefly mentioned in the form of a post-script in the last chapter, are twisted by Ackroyd. In his version John Lamb dies only “a few months after his wife’s murder” (*LL*: 210), and, more importantly, Ackroyd lets his Mary Lamb die as early as in 1804, being thus outlived by her brother. He in fact remains faithful to only two historical facts: that the two siblings collaborated on *Tales from Shakespeare* and that they are buried in the same churchyard. However, the book was in reality completed in 1807, thus three years after the death of Mary in the novel, and even the grave is not at St Andrew’s, Holborn as the novel claims, but in All Saints’ Churchyard, Edmonton, which only proves how “consistent” Ackroyd is in his toying with the past. Moreover, in Ackroyd’s version the doctor is called Philip Girtin and he recommends institutionalizing Mary in Hoxton House, “London’s largest and longest-established private madhouse” (Hitchcock 2005: 52), while in reality the doctor’s name was David Pitcarin, and he advised Charles to place his sister in Fisher House, “a modestly priced, smaller private madhouse in Islington” (Hitchcock 2005: 53). Ackroyd also makes Thomas de Quincey the person with whom Charles Lamb shares his feelings concerning the murder and its consequences on his and his sister’s psyches. It is true that Lamb and de Quincey knew each other very well, but his real “literary” confidant was his life-long friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who is never mentioned in the novel.

Ackroyd’s fictional rendering of Mary Lamb’s murder of her mother is based on a peculiar mixture of facts, speculations, conceits and imaginative constructs, whose blend is far more motivated by the desire to make the story interesting and readable rather than to follow historical records. Making de Quincey a few years older and Ireland a few years younger are therefore not the author’s only historical or factual inaccuracies, and the fact that his Mary stabs her mother with a roasting fork rather than with a kitchen knife appears to be rather a minor one. Not only does Ackroyd change the address of the house where the Lambs lived at the time of the murder, from Little Queen Street to Laystall Street, but he even omits from his account of the events one member of the household, Sarah Lamb, John Lamb’s elder sister, who was also present in

the house when the murder was committed. Concerning other aspects of the Lamb family background, *The Lambs of London* offers a combination of the factual and fictitious, which pragmatically selects only those facts that support and “legitimize” its author’s reconstruction of what led to the crime. Therefore, it is interesting to compare Ackroyd’s version with studies which use the available contemporaneous records and evidence to try to cast some light on this murder mystery.

Interestingly, at that time in England there was an intense fascination with the topic of insanity and the nation’s relationship to it due to the fact the king, George III, suffered from alarming fits of insanity from 1788, and the head of the state’s mental condition became a subject of public discussions (Watson 2004: 63). The circumstances of her act suggest that Mary Lamb also suffered from some psychological dysfunction, most probably from manic-depressive illness, or bipolar disorder, whose most manifest symptoms are recurrent episodes of depression and melancholy, characterized by morbidity, mania, high-spirited and irritable moods involving “both pleasurable elation and total frenzy” (Watson 2004: 2), impulsiveness, and rapidity and briskness of physical and mental activity, which, if untreated, may gradually become stronger and more frequent. Yet her case was not all that rare, and many of her creative contemporaries, such as Goldsmith, Coleridge, Wollstonecraft, Blake and the Shelleys, are suspected of having suffered from a related mental disorder (Hitchcock 2005: 277-278). Yet, no matter how peculiar and eccentric most of these personages were, none of them ever overstepped the limits of socially, not to say legally, acceptable behaviour so greatly. The crucial question of what it was that provoked such an uncontrollable and fierce rage in the otherwise timid and forgiving young woman thus arises, whether it was merely her genetic predisposition towards mental instability, or whether some external factors contributed to her temporary, yet fatal, loss of control.

Unmarried and childless at the age of nearly thirty-two, Mary Lamb was condemned to a life of solitude and sacrifice, exposed to patronizing compassion bordering on social scorn from her surroundings, and confined to the household to look after her elders and serve the men around her. A significant change in the relatively prosperous, though still serving-class, life of the family came when John Lamb’s employer, Samuel Salt, died in 1792. Salt was not only an esteemed lawyer, but also a kind and generous person who liked John Lamb and valued and paid well for his services. He was in fact the family’s benefactor as he not only provided them with a place to live above his law office in the Inner Temple, one of London’s four venerable Inns of Court, but also used his influence to recommend both their sons for entry into London’s finest charity school and to secure clerical positions for them in the South Sea Company as they came of age (Hitchcock 2005: 21-24). And so when Salt died, the

family's income not only dropped noticeably, but they also lost their home and had to move to a place more suited to their new economic reality. The situation was too devastating for John Lamb and he suffered a serious stroke at this time, lost his job and due to his worsening mental and physical condition demanded almost permanent care and supervision. During the same period of time, Elizabeth Lamb began to experience arthritic pains that eventually affected her whole body and she found it difficult even to stand and walk. The eldest household member, aunt Sarah, ironically required the least care, yet she was an ill-tempered woman who had a very problematic relationship with her brother's wife, and the household suffered from various manifestations of the two sisters-in-law's intolerance of each other (Hitchcock 2005: 25-26). As Mary later recalled, the two women "made each other miserable for full twenty years of their lives" as the aunt "used to hate my Mother with a bitter hatred, which of course was soon returned with interest" (Watson 2004: 11).

In the years preceding the murder, Mary Lamb's personal life was therefore far from enviable as she remained the only adult capable of running the household. Her older brother, John Lamb, had long been living on his own, her younger brother Charles was at work or in a pub with his friends, her father was mentally incapacitated, and her mother basically paralyzed and bedridden with lame limbs, so the very functioning of the family leaned entirely on her, for which she received very little but ingratitude, if not reproach and scorn from her mother. In the tense and often distressing atmosphere of the small apartment Mary did almost all the chores, looked after her father during the day and after her mother, with whom she had even begun to share a bed, during the night, she had to listen to and reconcile the wrangling of her mother and her dotty aunt, and, in the little leisure time she had, instead of her beloved reading, she did needlework and took up the trade of mantua making in order to augment the family income, which was composed, by and large, only of her younger brother's salary and her father's modest pension. Late in 1795, Charles suffered a mental breakdown and spent six weeks as a patient in Hoxton House, London's best-known private asylum. The cause of this episode is unknown as no medical records concerning it have been found, but owing to Charles's problems with drinking it may have been triggered by his excessive indulgence in alcohol. Brother John lived separately but early in the summer of 1796 he had an accident and hurt his leg so severely that he moved back in with his family for a while, adding thus one more soul for Mary to care for. Moreover, only a few days before the homicidal incident the family, most probably Charles, hired a nine-year-old apprentice who was supposed to help Mary with the chores and duties but who, due to her age and being unfamiliar with the new environment, may have quickly turned into a burden for Mary, and the girl in fact unintentionally initiated a series of causes and effects leading to the matricide (Hitch-

cock 2005: 26-28).⁵ Considering all her responsibilities and the difficult family situation, it is obvious that Mary must have been exposed to psychic pressure so intense and stressful that it could easily have struck down a person with a lesser genetic predisposition to mental instability than hers.

In Ackroyd's version the situation in the Lamb family differs in many respects: even though the father suffers from some mental illness (the cause of which, however, remains a mystery) and rapidly progressing senility, talks nonsense and needs to be looked after permanently, Charles feels like a lonely outsider who has problems with alcohol, frequently coming home drunk late at night, and the mother never seems to understand her daughter or appreciate what she does, the rest of the story is altered substantially. The family by no means leans entirely on Mary as her mother is physically perfectly capable and runs the household authoritatively while tending to her husband "with her powerful right arm" (*LL*: 3), the apprentice girl is removed from the murder scene, the wrangling aunt is replaced by a docile and kindhearted elderly maid who is too frail to perform all the chores and Mary has to take on only "the most onerous duties" (*LL*: 6), and so Mary does not have to look after her mother day and night, she sleeps alone in her own bedroom, she can leave the house almost as she pleases, and she does not take up her needle to earn money when her parents have gone to bed but spends most of her free time reading Charles's books. Moreover, there is no mention of Charles's mental breakdown or any other similar problem on his side (nor is the stammer that troubled him his whole life mentioned),⁶ on the contrary, it is he who worries about his sister's sudden changes of mood, her fits of hysteria alternating with periods of absent-mindedness, and her tendency to toy and harm herself with a kitchen knife.

However, the most significant of these changes or speculations is acquainting William Ireland with Charles and Mary Lamb, a narrative act for which there is no basis in the historical records. William and Mary are drawn to each other thanks to several similar traits in their personalities and life situations: they both are intelligent, thoughtful and sensitive people with a thirst for knowledge and learning, yet they both are, though for different reasons, self-effacing loners overlooked and underestimated by those around them. As a result, they both dream of setting themselves free from what they perceive as an oppressive life of stereotypical convention, prejudice and hypocrisy. Ackroyd

⁵ For a more detailed account of what immediately preceded the matricidal act, including the role the nine-year-old apprentice played in the course of events, see Hitchcock (2005: 28-29).

⁶ Hitchcock (2005: 81-82) discusses the social and personal consequences of Charles Lamb's stammer, which he eventually learnt to use to his advantage, and other minor physical defects such as a short stature and an uneven gait, mostly results of his childhood case of smallpox.

makes the insecure yet ambitious and rather self-conscious Ireland a close friend of Mary's, one who invites her to be his confidant and with whom he shares the secret of his new "findings". The credulous Mary soon experiences an extraordinary liking for this uncommonly contemplative young gentleman and defends him against all accusations that he has been far from honest with her and the literary world. She refuses to listen to her brother, who gradually develops a suspicion concerning the young man's trustworthiness, agreeing with de Quincey that "Ireland forges his feelings as he forges words" (LL: 183), warning her that Ireland's motives might not be always sincere and honest. When she eventually discovers the true origin of the manuscripts it severely unsettles her fragile mental condition. Ackroyd's version suggests that Ireland could have been the deciding factor that caused the distress that preceded the murder and thus possibly played a crucial role in it. His Mary develops a close relationship with Ireland, one that borders on affection, and therefore takes his confession of forgery as an ultimate betrayal of their mutual trust, understanding and what she takes as almost a secret bond of spirit and soul. As a result, she suffers a mental breakdown after which she is "filled with an overpowering sense of his absence" (LL: 204), but still she feels an elated cheerfulness from her sudden breaking free from all the responsibilities and conventions of her miserable existence, "discharged from life ... after valiant service" (LL: 204), and only a few hours later she commits the murder. Ackroyd thus adds to the amalgam of personal and societal reasons – Mary's anger towards and frustration with her mother, her overwhelming family duties, her repressed feelings and desires, namely being deprived of the classical education enjoyed by her brothers, and a genetic tendency towards mental instability – another significant component that actually triggers the family tragedy.

In the acknowledgement placed before the story, Ackroyd claims that he "changed the life of the Lamb family for the sake of the larger narrative", yet he does not say anything about his treatment of the Ireland family, whose fate he twists in a similar manner. Again, the basic factual framework of the events is retained: William-Henry Ireland,⁷ a young, much overlooked and underestimated boy, desperately longs to win the love and respect of his intransigent father, Samuel Ireland, a "pompous, social climbing writer, engraver, and collector of antiquities" (Stewart 2010: 1) A passionate admirer of William Shakespeare who lusts after the great author's memorabilia, he forges several documents associated with or supposedly written by the bard, such as a signed deed,

⁷ In *The Lambs of London*, Ackroyd does not use the forger's middle name "Henry" although both the boy and his family commonly used it. The boy had been named "Henry" in honour of the Tory politician and writer Henry St John Bolingbroke, while his first name had been probably chosen as a homage to Shakespeare (Pierce 2004: 21).

a love letter, poems and an entirely new play, *Vortigen*, which was even staged by Sheridan at Drury Lane. On the one hand, the play was in places a clumsy pastiche of characters and scenes from Shakespeare's other plays, including *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Pericles*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar* or *As You Like It*, on the other hand, the teenage forger wrote his first drama almost as quickly and fluently as his model, and without a draft, in only six weeks (Stewart 2010: 91). As in the case of Mary and Charles Lamb, this story is simultaneously tragic and amusing, and is also partly unbelievable from the modern perspective as well as shrouded in mystery; unbelievable with regard to the enormous success of the forgeries, mysterious in terms of the forger's origin. Although the forged documents were rather amateurish as they were produced within a short period of several months by a teenager of limited education, poor mastery of his mother tongue (for instance, Ireland initially spelled by ear and never punctuated, Pierce 2004: 232), and only very superficial knowledge of English literature and history, and who in his own father's eyes was nothing more than a half-educated simpleton who lacked his father's intellect and sophistication (Stewart 2010: 65), many contemporary literati, scholars and men of letters, including Samuel Parr, Joseph Warton, R.B. Sheridan, Edmund Burke and James Boswell, believed that the "Shakespeare Papers" were authentic. The explanation could be that these people simply wanted the papers to be genuine.

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed an increasing interest in Elizabethan and medieval literature, most notably in Shakespeare's life and work. As "aside from a few signatures, nothing written in Shakespeare's hand – not a letter, not so much as a couplet – had ever been found" (Stewart 2010: 2), many people believed that some more documents or even works of the bard could still be discovered. The cult of Shakespeare, or "Bardolatry" as it was labelled, was thus well established, yet the level of Shakespearian scholarship was not, textual study was in its infancy and palaeography almost unknown – there was more enthusiasm and fascination than expertise, most experts being self-taught and self appointed (Pierce 2004: 3-4). The rapidly expanding British empire started to take pride in its cultural history and cherish its greatest literary genius as the trend towards Romanticism strengthened. The art of forgery in fact fully developed in the eighteenth century and was associated with the relatively new phenomena of professional authorship and a growing commercial publishing market. However, the "most significant connection is to be found between forgery and the burgeoning movement known as 'romanticism'" as "[t]he forged document and the 'romantic' personality are manifestations of the same change in taste" (Ackroyd 2004: 421). Therefore, it was also the time of famous and successful forgeries, especially James Macpherson's Ossian poems in the early 1760s and Thomas Chatterton's *Rowley poems* a few years later. The story of Chatterton stirred William-Henry's imagination, especially the

striking similarities between the two boys' age and background. "He brooded on his affinities with Chatterton. He composed an acrostic on his name, and, more importantly, imitations of his medieval poetry. Forgery seemed the logical next step" (Kelly 2008: 72). He believed Chatterton "an unrecognized genius much like himself" (Pierce 2004: 15, 33),⁸ yet he did not choose to forge some "lost", obscure ancient poems by unknown authors but those by the most-worshipped literary figure. This act was immensely daring for a young aspiring writer because if disclosed it "would be, in the eyes of literary society, to perpetrate a most grievous fraud" (Stewart 2010: 110).

On the personal level, there was uncertainty surrounding William-Henry's parentage, as he could not be sure whether either of the two adults who had brought him up, Samuel Ireland and his partner, Mrs. Freeman, were his biological parents, and although he repeatedly asked his father he never received any definite answer concerning his true origin (Pierce 2004: 19-20). Mrs. Freeman's maternal feelings were well concealed, she was a disagreeable, at times malicious woman whom Samuel Ireland treated as if she were a domestic servant and whom he never married, in part because she had been the mistress of John Montagu, the notorious eighteenth century English Casanova, Lord Sandwich, but whose fortune (probably received in compensation from the lord) was likely a reason why Samuel settled with her (Stewart 2010: 12-14). All this can also explain Samuel's lack of warmth, and interest and belief in his son, which troubled William-Henry deeply and provoked in him an almost obsessive desire to please his father and gain his attention and recognition. Yet, no matter how successful his forgeries were, he never managed to achieve his main goal: the opportunist and foolishly obstinate Samuel Ireland grew interested not in his son, but in his own fame and profit, repeatedly ignored William-Henry's pleas not to exhibit and later publish the documents, and even after William-Henry's confession refused to believe, until the end of his life four years later, that the "precious" papers were produced by his dull-looking, incompetent, childlike son.

In *The Lambs of London*, Ackroyd makes use of the fact that the two events took place at more or less the same time, and that their main protagonists suffered from deprivations and frustrations resulting from an analogous social and personal situation. Also, the personality and character of his Samuel Ireland and the nature of the relationship between the father and the son more or less correspond with reality. However, as with the Lambs, the alterations he makes for

⁸ For his whole life, and even more after the exposure of his forgeries, William-Henry Ireland continued to admire Chatterton, he devoted to him a book of poems entitled *Neglected Genius*, and he kept emphasising the close association between 'the Rowleian Chatterton and the Shakespearean Ireland' (Kelly 2008: 78-79).

the sake of his story fundamentally distort the available historical records. First, there are the household members: instead of the educated and well-read Mrs. Freeman, herself an aspiring writer, who could potentially be William-Henry's real mother, Ackroyd's Samuel Ireland lives with the narrow-minded Rosa Ponting, whom he even secretly marries after the death of his first wife and William's true mother; Ackroyd also never mentions William's two older sisters. His William works as an assistant in his father's shop while in reality he apprenticed as a law conveyancer. This William feels nothing when visiting Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford, while the real one "became ecstatic with the sensation of being immersed in air the Bard breathed, the ground he had walked upon" and later admitted that the visit "greatly conducted to the subsequent production of the papers" (Pierce 2004: 36, 41). Ackroyd also changes the gender of the mysterious "source" of the papers, from a Mr. H., whom William-Henry as a law clerk, as he claimed to his father, supposedly saved a considerable sum of money (Stewart 2010: 85), to an unnamed widow. His treatment of the role of real historical personages in the case is eclectically inaccurate as well: while some are retained, like Dr. Samuel Parr who strongly believed in the papers' authenticity, R.B. Sheridan who staged *Vortigen* even though he considered it an immature work by the young Shakespeare, or Kemble, the famous actor and manager, whose deliberately unprofessional acting heavily undermined the performance⁹, some are left out, like James Boswell, Dr. Joseph Warton or George Steevens (though there is a Mr. Stevens on the committee of inquiry), and some are changed. The most significant of these changes relates to the character of Edmond Malone, the most prominent Shakespearean scholar of that time, who in the novel thoroughly examines the papers and pronounces them to be genuine. In reality, Malone had serious doubts concerning the papers' authenticity from the very beginning (he had also been one of the first to attack Chatterton's poems thirty years before).¹⁰ He was an "accurate professional" who "based his work on the most careful detailed and irrefutable research, which he pursued with unremitting ardour" (Pierce 2004: 151-52), but his wish to see the papers in private was repeatedly turned down by Samuel Ireland who had no desire to subject the documents to such an in-depth scrutiny, and so Malone had to wait until Samuel Ireland's *Miscellaneous papers and legal instruments under the hand and seal of William Shakespeare* was published on 24 December, 1795, and on 10 January he sat down to write his re-

⁹ Kemble intended to put on the first performance of *Vortigen* on April Fools' Day, but the first night was eventually moved on to 2 April.

¹⁰ To his growing fury, Edmond Malone twice attempted, unsuccessfully, to have some of the papers removed temporarily from their public display in Norfolk Street in order to scrutinize them at home and with his friends. For a more detailed description of Malone's examination and disapproval of the Shakespeare Papers see Pierce (2004: 151-166).

sponse. He originally intended it to be a short pamphlet, but as he assembled more and more pieces of evidence, the work grew into a 424-page book, which methodically dismissed each of the forgeries. Malone's book was published on 31 March, 1796, only two days before *Vortigen* was to be staged, but 500 copies were sold during this short period and it negatively affected the performance (Pierce 2004: 160-164), certainly much more than the "Rank Forgery" handbill distributed in front of the theatre in Ackroyd's version.

The list of differences could continue – for instance, William-Henry did not confess to his father whose reaction he feared but to his sisters and Mrs. Freeman, he did not set the house on fire while burning the papers but secretly moved out and for some time the family had no idea where he was, and he soon married a girl none of his friends and family had known existed (Pierce 2004: 177-185), an event Ackroyd logically omits completely. Although William-Henry did set up a circulating library, it was not in Kennington but near Kensington Gardens, and he could hardly send out *Tales from Shakespeare* to his borrowers (*LL*: 216) since when the book was published he was no longer operating the library. Most importantly, in order to combine Mary Lamb's and William Ireland's stories, Ackroyd has to change the historical chronology of events, as in reality the murder took place on 22 September, but William-Henry confessed already in May and married on 4 June. Moreover, he left London in late July, first for Wales and then he roamed around the country and was not back in the city until the end of October. At the time of the murder he was in Bristol, visiting the birthplace of Thomas Chatterton (Pierce 2004: 186-194).

4. Out of the shadows

The intriguing stories of Mary Lamb and William-Henry Ireland have more in common than it may seem at first sight: the protagonists are ignored and underestimated, they suffer from loneliness, frustration and despair resulting from a lack of parental love and respect, as well as from the burden of conventions and expectations, their intellectual and literary aspirations are doomed to remain unfulfilled due to their social status, and so their subsequent crimes, which put them on the front pages of newspapers and in the centre of many public debates, in a way freed them from most of the restraints of their former existence. However, there is one more aspect that connects the two affairs – they could have only happened in the capital city, not only because of its anonymity, but mainly because of London being the economic, cultural and intellectual centre of the country, which crucially determines the values, preferences and moral attitudes of its inhabitants. Nowhere else could Mary have got away so easily with her matricide, lived peacefully in her brother's house, and even become a respectable literary personality and author of popular children's books; nowhere else

could William-Henry have got away with the tale about his mysterious benefactor; and nowhere else would his forgeries have caused such a commotion far beyond literary and scholarly circles. The two stories aptly demonstrate how the city can easily make and destroy a person, how generous it can be in offering opportunities, but also how unpredictable and merciless when judging those who trespass its laws: paradoxically, even though William-Henry's offence was much less serious than Mary's, it was deemed so "unforgivable" that it ultimately spoiled his chances as an actor, playwright and writer in London, forced him to leave England for France, and, despite his authorship of more than sixty books, prevented him from ever gaining any substantial recognition.

The Lambs of London exemplifies Ackroyd's conviction that biographies and fictions should not be understood as separate activities (Murray 2007: 85), and thus offers another contribution to the discussion over the possibility of literary history. Although the Lambs were very likely to have known about Ireland's forgeries from the daily press, the three young people most probably never met in person. By combining their fates Ackroyd fabricates yet a new dimension to the exciting literary and intellectual milieu of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London, and, by rewriting their life-stories, he simultaneously contributes a palimpsestic rewriting of the city and its biography. The fact that the past will never be known completely since it contains too many mysteries and gaps caused by the absence of reliable evidence serves as a double-edged sword: it tempts writers and scholars to come up with speculative versions which might, on the one hand, further obscure the original events and, in effect, impede their subsequent disclosure, but which, on the other hand, have the potential to draw more attention to these less well-known events and circumstances. And once questions are posed, answers are demanded as, for instance, a "psychiatric diagnosis does not entirely satisfy our fascination with Mary Lamb" (Hitchcock 2005: 279). *The Lambs of London* does not help literary scholars with the lack of clarity concerning Mary Lamb's mental disposition or William-Henry Ireland's parentage, but it undoubtedly brings the two unfortunate people's lives to the forefront of many readers' interest and thus, though only through the means of fictitious narrative, saves the first from forever being mentioned only in the footnotes of her brother's biographies, and the latter from forever staying in Chatterton's shadow. If Mary Lamb and William-Henry Ireland were guilty of their crimes, so is Peter Ackroyd – those of "fakery, pastiche, and plagiarism" (Lewis 2007: 141), of blurring the novel and biography, of eclectic disrespect for recorded history, but, most of all, of making the literary texture of the city even more colourful and exciting.

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