A CHALLENGE TO CHARLES LAMB'S
"ON THE TRAGEDIES OF
SHAKESPEARE"

THESIS

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This study challenges Charles Lamb's 1811 essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation," which argues that Shakespeare's plays are better suited for reading than stage production.

Each of the four chapters considers a specific argument Lamb raises against the theatre and the particular Shakespearean tragedy used to illustrate his point. The *Hamlet* chapter examines the supposed concessions involved in the actor/audience relationship. The *Macbeth* chapter challenges Lamb's Platonic view of Shakespearean characterization. The *Othello* chapter considers whether some characters and images, while acceptable to the reader's imagination, are improper on stage. Finally, the *King Lear* chapter considers the portrayal of the mind in the theatre, employing semiotic principles to examine the actor's expressive resources.
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In his essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered With Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation," Charles Lamb makes his notorious pronouncement regarding Shakespearean performance:

It may seem a paradox, but I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage, than those of almost any other dramatist whatever. Their distinguishing excellence is a reason that they should be so. There is so much in them, which comes not under the province of acting, with which eye, and tone, and gesture, have nothing to do.

(1: 115)

Lamb goes on, in an essay of some seven thousand words, to argue that only the imagination of the sensitive reader can fully appreciate the richness of Shakespeare's text, while the theatre, and acting in particular, inevitably reduces Shakespeare's genius to something less than its full stature.

Written in 1811 and published in Leigh Hunt's *Reflector* in 1812, Lamb's essay has not always received the careful
consideration it warrants. It "has been considered eccentric by most twentieth-century commentators" (Heller 25). Because of the disarming ease and informality of many of his writings, "readers have largely assumed that the charm of Lamb's essays is the character of his criticism too, and they have not bothered to give him a careful reading" (Ades 514). Too often his work has been seen as indicative of "an armchair aesthete unwilling to allow the intrusion of flesh and blood into his reading of literature" (Park 164). More and more, though, in recent years, Lamb's ideas have begun to receive serious attention, and his analysis of the inherent inadequacies of stage representation has presented a lasting challenge. As one critic has pointed out, the essay "marks an important moment in the history of comparative media valuation" (Arac 210-11), while another argues that "Lamb seems to have been the first English critic to face the dichotomy between the response to performance and the response to text," adding that in doing so Lamb "raised a question that has never been satisfactorily answered" (Booth 15). A short survey of some relatively recent studies shows that Lamb can still spark critical interest. But strangely enough, few if any of these responses accept the central challenge of Lamb's argument.
Sylvan Barnet's 1954 essay, "Charles Lamb's Contribution to the Theory of Dramatic Illusion," helped pioneer the reappraisal of Lamb's thought in recent years: Lamb's concept of dramatic illusion, the most sophisticated, the most discriminating, and the most accurate treatment of the problem in the history of English dramatic theory, entitles him to consideration as an important dramatic critic. (1158-59)

Barnet points out that Lamb's theory of acting and dramatic illusion is based on a crucial distinction between comedy, whose appeal is intellectual and based on a certain distance between audience and performer, and tragedy, whose appeal is emotional and requires more involvement on the spectator's part. This theory was stated better by Lamb than by any of his predecessors, was unexplored by his contemporaries, and is identical in its essentials to theories propounded by modern aestheticians (1153). Barnet demonstrates that Lamb occupies a significant place in the development of a theory of dramatic illusion, but does not confront the issue of Lamb's anti-theatrical stance regarding Shakespeare's tragedies.

Charles I. Patterson, in "Charles Lamb, Shakespeare, and the Stage Reconsidered" (1964), sets out to correct what he sees as the misconception that Lamb condemned theatrical
performance of Shakespeare's plays outright. Patterson points to the oft-quoted passage in which Lamb disarmingly proclaims, "I am not arguing that Hamlet should not be acted, but how much Hamlet is made another thing by being acted" (1: 117). He points out that Lamb's preference for reading Shakespeare rather than seeing him performed was neither eccentric--Hazlitt, Coleridge, and Schlegel all expressed essentially the same view--nor as extreme as some critics have held:

Neither here nor elsewhere does Lamb contend that Shakespeare's tragedies should never be put on the stage, that reading them should always supplant seeing them acted; he contends that reading them is preferable, and at times necessary, for probing their depths and for centering attention on their deeper elements. (102)

Patterson further clarifies what he means by "deeper elements," arguing that for Lamb the function of tragic drama is "to reveal the deep inner levels of the consciousness, which are the residing places of the motives and ground of human actions" (104). But in upholding Lamb's view that the greatest drama is concerned with the inner workings of the consciousness, Patterson ignores those external "human actions" which arise out of such internal turmoil, and which define the specifically dramatic form.
Patterson also understates the vehemence of Lamb's objections to the theatre. Although in a single passage Lamb admits he is not arguing against Shakespearean productions, he devotes his entire essay to pointing out what Shakespeare loses in the theatre, without indicating that there might be any compensatory gains.

John I. Ades, in "Charles Lamb, Shakespeare, and Early Nineteenth-Century Theater" (1970), points out that, unlike Coleridge, "Lamb comes to his study as a result of having first been to the theater" (515). Ades emphasizes Lamb's experience as a lifelong playgoer and careful observer of the possibilities of dramatic representation on the London stage of his day. He argues that Lamb had to struggle with two claims on his critical judgment: on the one hand that "the theatrical traditions of his time were simply inimical to the satisfactory playing of Shakespearean tragedy," on the other hand that "in certain tragedies Shakespeare achieved such imaginative sublimity that no conceivable cast of actors could ever fulfill the poet's expectations" (517). Ades maintains that the former view was far more important in shaping Lamb's criticism, and in effect limits the scope of Lamb's essay from aesthetics to a mere description of the conditions of his day. But Lamb himself never claimed that his arguments applied only to nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, and although there were certainly modern
developments in acting and stagecraft which he could not have anticipated, it is an injustice to him to assume that therefore his arguments are necessarily obsolete.

Joan Coldwell, in "The Playgoer as Critic: Charles Lamb on Shakespeare's Characters" (1975), views Lamb's essay and the general romantic tendency to prefer Shakespeare in the closet rather than on stage as a reaction against the equally romantic development of the cult of the actor, as in Hazlitt's writings on Edmund Kean (184-85). Coldwell maintains that "Lamb chose his own imaginings of Shakespeare's characters over actual presentations of them after years of regular playgoing" (185), and correctly discerns that for Lamb Shakespeare's characters are "imaginative, intellectual creations to be perceived by the mind rather than by the senses" (195). Thus, in Lamb's view, "staging only degrades an abstract ideal and reduces one's ability to identify with the characters" (195). For Coldwell, Lamb's analysis of character is his most lasting contribution:

The real value of his criticism lies not in its method but in the insights it gives to Shakespeare's characters, the more remarkable because offered at a time when character analysis was still a relatively new and undeveloped type of critical study. (195)
Coldwell shows an appreciation of the importance of Lamb's ideas on Shakespearean characters, but does not attempt to evaluate the merits of his view or its adequacy in the face of stage representation.

Michael R. Booth, in "Theatre History and the Literary Critic" (1979), sees Lamb's essay as pointing out the problem of reconciliation between two opposing and seemingly incompatible realms:

In what way, if at all, can the understanding and appreciation of dramatic texts be integrated with the understanding and appreciation of performance so that the two types of response constitute a single coherent and unified approach to the complete dramatic entity? (15)

He considers Lamb's essay along with more modern studies by J. L. Styan, Raymond Williams, and John Russell Brown, all of whom have considered "the problem of response to the duality of text and performance" (16).

But in looking for a unification of theatrical presentation and literary interpretation, Booth may be seeking a reconciliation from which Lamb himself would have recoiled, and which may be at best unnecessary and at worst impossible. Even if we do not accept Lamb's arguments against the theatre, we need not chafe against his contention that Hamlet acted is quite another thing from
Hamlet read. Furthermore, any attempt to unify the two experiences, rather than revel in their stimulating contrast, would most likely be undertaken from the biased standpoint of trying to make one medium fit the restrictions of the other.

Roy Park's "Lamb, Shakespeare, and the Stage" (1982), like Patterson's essay, points out Lamb's affinities with Hazlitt and Coleridge, thus arguing that Lamb's opinions are not "willful paradox or whimsical eccentricity" (168). Park also sides with Patterson in refuting the belief that Lamb "did not like the theatre and entertained a bias against actors" (164). Lamb frequently enjoyed the theatre of his day, and his arguments are not directed specifically against it. Unlike John Ades, Park holds that Lamb's case against acting is "aesthetic and normative," and "does not hinge in any vital respect on his lack of relish for contemporary performances" (176). Park seeks to place Lamb's views on theatre within an overall conception of the fallen nature of man, in which the two basic antagonists within the human psyche are the imagination and the reason, the latter also allied with the senses as their coordinating faculty (165). Thus, for Lamb, the ultimate value of art--and in particular of the imaginative faculty it fosters--is redemptive (166).

Park's essay offers stimulating insights into Lamb's larger aesthetic and philosophical presuppositions. But
once he has defined Lamb's central paradigm as a dichotomy between imagination and reason/senses, Park fails to pursue the ramifications such a concept has for Lamb's view of the stage, or to question whether such a strict dichotomy is an adequate basis to dismiss so complex a medium as the theatre.

Janet Ruth Heller's "Charles Lamb and the Reader of Drama" (1983) argues that Lamb's essay has taken on particular significance in the light of modern motion picture adaptations of Shakespeare and other literary works, which have caused critics to weigh anew the advantages and disadvantages of representation over reading. Lamb is thus seen as anticipating much modern film criticism. Heller also provides a useful list of pairs of antithetical terms employed by Lamb, which becomes in effect an elaboration on the imagination/senses dichotomy discussed by Park.

Heller's main argument, however, relates Lamb's essay to the modern reader-response criticism of Stanley Fish, Walter Slatoff, and Wolfgang Iser, pointing out that few twentieth-century critics have considered the specific problem of the reader's response to plays. As Heller points out, "Lamb tries to make his reading public receptive to the literary power of drama. He urges readers to open their minds and to participate actively in the experience of literature" (32). Heller sees Lamb spurring the reader on
to a fuller participation in the reading experience: "Over and over, Lamb insists that both authors and readers must cooperate with and challenge one another" (26). But while Heller's article is useful in pointing out the reader-response implications of Lamb's essay, she ignores the fact that Lamb's true focus is the inadequacy of the stage. Active, imaginative reading is to be encouraged in its own right, but Heller does not consider whether it should be accepted without question as a substitute for or inherently superior to stage performance.

Jonathan Arac's "The Media of Sublimity: Johnson and Lamb on King Lear" (1987) echoes Park's article in its view that Lamb's essay "clearly displays the transfer of religious terms of value into a new psychological space" (210). He supports his contention that the essay "runs from its beginning through its end in a religious idiom" (214) with numerous quotations demonstrating Lamb's reliance on traditional Christian imagery. Like Heller, Arac also points out the added interest Lamb's essay holds for our own day, which has been complicated by "the tremendous growth of cultural production and transmission of film, videotape, radio, television, records, and all the other nonprint media that nonetheless wield the power of the word" (210).

In Arac's view, Lamb is essentially anti-democratic; he "attacked the public and relied instead on an elite of
individual readers" (212) But rather than viewing Lamb's essay as determined by the concept of reader response as Heller maintains, Arac holds that "the defining feature of Lamb's aesthetic sect was the category of the author" (214-15), a concept intended to forestall the false judgements which lead to identifying stage actors with the creative power of the writer or with the characters they portray. While Heller sees Lamb's turn from the stage as a reaction to the romantic actor cult, Arac places Lamb's arguments within the context of "the romantic shift from audience-centered to author-centered poetics" (215). But Arac does not point out that Lamb's concept of authorship is presented in a definite context which looks specifically at how an author's creation is affected by stage performance.

This brief survey has hopefully demonstrated not only the new seriousness Lamb's arguments are being accorded, but also the variety of responses his essay can elicit. It also may have hinted at some of the presuppositions that will underlie the present study. Before proceeding further, it may be useful to make some of those presuppositions explicit:

1) Lamb's essay is primarily about the theatre, and in particular, acting. It is true that, as the title suggests, the essay is "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare," but these works are only considered, as the title also indicates, in
terms of their "Fitness for Stage Representation." And further, although some of Lamb's reservations about the stage apply particularly to these plays--such as his view of Shakespearean characterization--several of his arguments, true or false, would apply equally well to other playwrights. And though the essay may have significant implications for reader-response theory, as Heller shows, or theories of authorship, as Arac points out, such exclusive focus on the writer-reader relationship ignores Lamb's central argument while giving tacit assent to its conclusions.

2) Those conclusions are strongly anti-theatrical. It is not enough to point out that Lamb was able to enjoy many of the performances of his day, or that he saw theatrical performance as in some ways an adequate representation of some playwrights. Lamb's essay focuses not on the strengths but on the limitations of the stage, the points at which it ceases to be sufficient to illuminate the dramatic text. And although Patterson may point out Lamb's one concession to the theatre--that he would not forbid the performance of Hamlet--this hardly outweighs the general condemnation throughout the essay.

3) Lamb's argument applies to theatre generally, not just to the conventions of his own day. Thus, Park's view that Lamb's contentions are "aesthetic and normative" is
accepted over Ades' belief that the essay is limited to the early nineteenth-century theatre. Accordingly, in considering Lamb's arguments the present study freely draws upon theatrical traditions not only of Shakespeare's day and of Lamb's, but of later periods up to our own era, assuming that the validity of Lamb's arguments must be tested against modern innovations in acting and stagecraft.

4) Lamb's arguments, however testy or perverse they may appear to some, are based on carefully considered philosophical and aesthetic presuppositions, as Barnet and others have demonstrated. Many of Lamb's views which have frequently been rejected as mere caprice were substantially, though not as forcefully, expressed by Coleridge and Hazlitt. His ideas require detailed examination. The present study is, so far as the author knows, the most extensive to date on this one essay of Lamb's, and even so there are important aspects of his argument--such as the role of costumes or stagecraft, or the representation of the supernatural on stage--which are not dealt with.

5) Finally, although Lamb's objection to theatre is based on a fully developed aesthetic, it is, nonetheless, fundamentally wrong about the limitations of theatrical representation and the suitability of Shakespeare for the stage. Although Lamb's contentions will be taken seriously, the attempt throughout this study will be to provide a
challenge and a refutation to several of Lamb's key arguments.

Each of the four chapters that follows addresses a specific argument Lamb raises against the theatre, at the same time focusing on the particular Shakespearean tragedy Lamb uses to illustrate his point. The arrangement suggests a tidy symmetry which does not actually characterize Lamb's essay, but which does serve as a useful device for isolating specific issues. The plays are presented neither in the order Shakespeare wrote them, nor in the exact order Lamb discusses them, but in a sequence that seemed sensible given the various points under consideration. Because each chapter looks at a different issue, it forms a distinct entity unto itself, drawing upon whatever materials and concepts were appropriate to the particular topic under discussion.

The chapter on *Hamlet* examines Lamb's thoughts on the actor's relationship to an audience and the supposed concessions this entails. The discussion considers post-Stanislavski theatre practices and also considers the actor-audience relationship at work in Hamlets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapter on *Macbeth* challenges Lamb's Platonic view of Shakespearean characterization. It features an analysis of a performance by the leading tragic actress of Lamb's day, based on both
the actress's own thoughts about the role and on contemporary reports of her interpretation. The chapter on *Othello* addresses Lamb's strictures on what may appropriately be shown on stage. It surveys past controversies surrounding Othello's color, and attempts to find a modern analogy by which to test Lamb's assertion that some characters and images, while acceptable to the imagination of the reader, are "improper to be shewn to our bodily eye" (1: 125). Finally, the chapter on *King Lear* considers Lamb's most distinctive and challenging theme, the problem of portraying the workings of the mind on stage, and examines the actor's expressive resources, particularly gesture. Here an attempt is made to classify various types of theatrical gesture using the principles of semiotics, followed by an examination of the expressive capabilities, limitations, and traditional uses of each type.

This extended study of the key points of Lamb's essay should help underscore his importance as a theorist of dramatic illusion, while at the same time suggesting that the possibilities of the theatre go well beyond what he was able to discern.
CHAPTER I

"BUT THEY GET APPLAUSE BY IT":

HAMLET

Lamb's essay opens with his indignation at seeing a statue of the eighteenth-century actor David Garrick in Westminster Abbey, upon which is inscribed a verse comparing the actor's genius with that of Shakespeare. After bemoaning the confusion of a performer's skill at recitation with an author's truly creative abilities, Lamb eventually makes his central statement about Shakespeare's unsuitability for the stage, quoted at the beginning of the introduction above. This point marks the commencement of the main body of the essay, which now moves to a consideration of the actor's relationship to the audience.

Lamb has very definite and limited ideas about the nature of acting:

The glory of the scenic art is to personate passion, and the turns of passion; and the more coarse and palpable the passion is, the more hold upon the eyes and ears of the spectators the performer obviously possesses. (1: 115)
Lamb seems to assume that passion, or emotion, must be displayed along broad, simple lines if it is to register with an audience at all. He does not consider that such passions may be manifested more subtly or in ways that suggest greater complexity. The pioneer of modern acting technique, Constantin Stanislavski, knew that matters were not so straightforward:

Every passion is a complex of things experienced emotionally, it is the sum total of a variety of different feelings, experiences, states. All these component parts are not only numerous and varied but they are also often contradictory. In love there is often hatred and scorn, and admiration, and indifference, and ecstasy, and prostration, and embarrassment, and brazenness. (54-55)

For Lamb, however, acting is necessarily a representation of coarse, simple emotions, aimed at an audience whose very presence "reduces every thing to a controversy of elocution" (1: 116). Thus all characters, regardless of their natures or the dramatic situation, "must play the orator" (1: 116). Lamb maintains that even the most intimate love scenes are "sullied and turned from their very nature by being exposed to a large assembly," and cites the example of an actress whose courtship, while ostensibly
directed towards her beloved, "is manifestly aimed at the spectators" (1: 116).

Having defined his general objection to dramatic presentation before an audience, Lamb turns to the first play he will discuss in detail, Hamlet. He points out the appeal the role has held for actors since the seventeenth century, perhaps because of its length. But however popular the role has proved for star actors and audiences, Lamb finds it particularly unsuited to theatrical display: "But Hamlet himself--what does he suffer meanwhile by being dragged forth as the public schoolmaster, to give lectures to the crowd!" (1: 116) He goes on to specify why Hamlet of all characters has no business being brought before an audience:

Why, nine parts in ten of what Hamlet does, are transactions between himself and his moral sense, they are the effusions of his solitary musings, which he retires to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth. (1: 116-17)

Lamb's "nine parts in ten" is a markedly inflated figure. A quick tabulation based on the numbers given in the Pelican Complete Works of Shakespeare reveals that Hamlet, who probably spends more of his time talking to himself than any other Shakespearean character, is only
engaged in soliloquy or aside for sixteen percent of his lines (31). Only a sixth of the time is he lost in "the solitary effusions of his own musings." This figure might be raised if one were to include moments, such as the scene by Ophelia's grave, where Hamlet, although in the presence of his trusted friend Horatio, freely bares his soul. Nevertheless, the "shy, negligent, retiring Hamlet" (1: 117) is much more often than not called on to be a public figure, continually interacting with the world around him, forced to act a role before the Danish court even as he is being presented before a London audience. The private, inward-looking Hamlet Lamb discovers in reading the play is proportionately further from the truth than the "orator" to be seen on stage.

In focusing on the solitary, introverted Hamlet, Lamb is indulging in the romantic bias of his era. The idea of Hamlet as shy and retiring stems from Goethe, who in *Wilhelm Meister* expounded his somewhat notorious characterization of Shakespeare's young prince. As Goethe interpreted the character, "a lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away" (Kermode 427). This view of Hamlet as a wilting, hothouse "royal flower" (424) influenced a generation of criticism which saw Hamlet as too fragile to bear much
public exposure. And after Goethe presented a Hamlet who is not strong enough to bear up under the pressures of the world, Coleridge argued for one who is simply oblivious to them. For Coleridge, Hamlet had "a world within himself" (2: 152); thus the objects of the external world were "comparatively dim, and of no interest in themselves" (2: 150). Jonathan Arac argues that Lamb has repeated Coleridge's reading of Hamlet, which is part of a more general romantic "loss, or abandonment, of a decent public world of politics" (218). But Shakespeare, who numbered among his accomplishments the development of the history play, is intensely political even in as thoughtful a drama as Hamlet. The romantic reading is one-sided at best.

William Hazlitt, the other major dramatic critic of the romantic period, also held this view of Hamlet, and did not hesitate to offer instructions on how to perform the role:

He is, as it were, wrapped up in the cloud of his own reflections, and only thinks aloud. There should, therefore, be no attempt to impress what he says upon others by any exaggeration of emphasis or manner, no talking at his hearers.

(12)

But while Hazlitt offers hope that the actor will be able to adjust his interpretation to fit the requirements of the role, Lamb insists that this quintessentially romantic Hamlet is inherently unsuited to the stage:
These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce utters to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidants at once?

(1: 117)

Lamb had earlier overstated his argument regarding the amount of time Hamlet spends in soliloquy, but if, as Jonathan Ades argues, "Lamb's whole point of view is intimately connected with what Shakespeare turned out to be in Covent Garden and Drury Lane in early nineteenth-century London" (520), Lamb has actually undersold his case here. Actors giving performances in Covent Garden or Drury Lane, the two licensed London theatres, had to contend with considerably more than four hundred spectators at a time.

The theatres of Lamb's day had become immense. Sheridan had rebuilt Drury Lane in 1794, turning it into what the great tragic actress Sarah Siddons called "a wilderness of a place" (Hartnoll 173) with a seating capacity of 3,611 (Dobbs 120). After destruction by fire in 1809, the theatre was rebuilt on slightly more modest lines but was still able to hold 3,060 (Dobbs 133). Covent Garden, which burned a year before Drury Lane, was reopened in 1809 and accommodated the relatively paltry figure of 2,800 (Wyndham
There is no doubt that the inflated size of these theatres had an adverse effect on the acting of the day: "The immense auditorium led the actors to enlarge their gestures and amplify their voices to the detriment of their technique" (Hartnoll 173). But while Lamb's argument may have been partly influenced by this unwieldy situation, the basic issue remains the same whether the audience consists of four thousand, four hundred, or four. How can an actor represent a character while at the same time being responsible for the presentation of that character to an audience? For Lamb, this double consciousness undermines the very principle of theatre. He sees no options for the actor in handling Hamlet's speeches:

He must accompany them with his eye, he must insinuate them into his auditory by some trick of eye, tone, or gesture or he fails. He must be thinking all the while of his appearance, because he knows that all the while the spectators are judging of it. (1: 117)

Most actors nowadays would reject Lamb's accusation. Since the advent of Stanislavski and the various "method" outgrowths of his teaching, it has been a commonplace in the theatre that an actor, at least in the modern, more naturalistic theatre, can and must preserve the illusion of the "fourth wall" separating him from his audience, and
behave as if he were not under public scrutiny.
Stanislavski maintained that such a feat was possible and merely a matter of developing the proper technique:

The actor who has the trained habit can limit his attention within a circle of attention, he can concentrate on whatever enters that circle, and with only half an ear can listen to what transpires outside of it. . . . He can even narrow the circle to produce a state we may call public solitude. (24)

It appears from Lamb's essay that many, perhaps the majority of actors in his day, had not intuited this technique. And the idea of the "fourth wall" and public solitude, developed concurrently with the rise of realistic theatre in the late nineteenth century, would have baffled an audience in Shakespeare's era. J. L. Styan, an authority on Elizabethan stagecraft, insists that in that period the "fourth wall" convention was not observed and that "the soliloquy was always spoken to the audience and was never a mumbling into beard or bosom in a simulation of naturalistic thinking, as if the spectator were not there" (165). This convention of the player being in "intimate and immediate touch with the spectator" (73) had a long life. As Styan points out, "the tradition remained strong for some two hundred years that the character speaking in soliloquy should speak directly to the spectators" (72).
Thus, however painful Lamb might have found a Hamlet who spoke to the audience, his arguments fly just as much in the face of Shakespeare's intention as his overall rejection of Shakespearean performance. Furthermore, addressing the audience directly need not involve the actor's abandonment of his character. Another authority on Elizabethan staging, Bertram Joseph, maintains that the soliloquy spoken to the audience did not necessarily signal that the actor had stepped out of his role or had ceased to identify with the character he portrayed:

The actor nowadays remains in character; he brings the audience differently into what Stanislavski calls his "circle of concentration," behaving as if he were the character talking to the audience. Essentially there is no difference imaginatively between behaving as if he were the actual person talking to other "persons of the drama" and behaving as if he were that person talking to an audience; he is still identified. I know of no reason for assuming that the Elizabethan practice should have been different. (102)

Joseph points out that the actor, in Shakespeare's day as well as our own, has the capability of maintaining that circle of concentration while talking to an audience, simply by including the audience within it and making them part of
the imaginary circumstances of the play. The modern actress and teacher Uta Hagen elaborates on this process in her book *Respect for Acting*:

I am not talking to myself; the audience is my **partner**! This partner, the audience, must be made as particular as any other character with whom I have a dialogue in the play. **Who** are they?

**What's my relationship to them?** **Where** are they--in time as well as place? **Why** are they there, what is the obstacle, and **what** do I want from them? (207)

The actor who plays Hamlet and delivers his soliloquies to the audience does not necessarily drop out of character at those moments. Even if he adopts the romantic view of Hamlet as shy and introspective, he is not thereby prevented from talking to the spectators, but can find a way of addressing them from his shy, introspective standpoint. Whether the soliloquies are shared confidingly, as to a trusted friend, or given up grudgingly, as to a meddlesome but inescapable auditor, is a matter of the actor's choice. The mere fact of an audience's presence does not in itself determine Hamlet's character, but how he relates to that audience--and the options are unlimited--can go a long way toward defining a performance.
It is clear that Lamb does not fully appreciate these options, and does not allow for the subtle relationships possible, not only between an actor and a text, but between an actor and an audience. For Lamb, the presentation of a speech is an immutable, fixed entity, something to be simply "spouted" before an assembly (1: 115). Hearing the same speech recited numerous times by different interpreters holds no interest for him, and in fact only leads to monotony:

I confess myself utterly unable to appreciate that celebrated soliloquy in Hamlet, beginning "To be or not to be," or to tell whether it be good, bad or indifferent, it has become so handled and pawed about by declamatory boys and men, and torn so inhumanly from its living place and principle of continuity in the play, till it is become to me a perfect dead member. (1: 115)

Lamb has become jaded from hearing the speech recited too frequently, but does not consider whether the same "burn-out" might await the reader after repeated exposure to Shakespeare's text. In either case, the challenge to the reader or the actor is the same: to find something new in each encounter. That such variety is possible is suggested by the story, sometimes heard in theatre circles, of the experienced actor who set himself the exercise of reciting
"To be or not to be" every day, creating a different set of imaginary circumstances, and therefore a different interpretation of the speech, on each occasion. Even if the story is apocryphal, the problem is essentially that faced by any actor engaged in a long-running stage production. While repeating the same lines over and over day after day, the actor must somehow manage to create what William Gillette, a contemporary of Stanislavski, christened "the Illusion of the First Time":

Each successive audience before which it [the dramatic presentation] is given must feel--not think or reason about, but feel--that it is witnessing, not one of a thousand weary repetitions, but a Life Episode that is being lived just across the magic barrier of the footlights. That is to say, the Whole must have that indescribable Life-Spirit or Effect which produces the Illusion of Happening for the First Time. (Matthews 133)

This illusion of the first time can be created not only for the audience, but for the actor who must contend with repeating the same performance, the same lines, over and over again. Uta Hagen says of this problem:

The challenge to make a character live anew, as if for the first time, as if never before, night
after night after night, is, to me, almost more exciting than the idea of playing in repertory. Several times I have been lucky enough to run as long as two years in a good part in a good play, and each time I have found something brand new internally at the closing performance which I deeply regretted being unable to put to use the next night. (205)

That this continual finding of something new is possible, even with the so frequently "handled and pawed about" soliloquies of Hamlet, is attested by Alexander Woolcott's November 17, 1922, *New York Herald* review of John Barrymore's performance in the role:

Issuing from his lips, the very soliloquies which have so often separated out from the rest of the play as set pieces of oratory seemed to have been spoken for the first time last evening, seemed to have been thought for the first time, and in the complete silence that was their audience's tribute to something genuine and alive they seemed for once just a lonely, unhappy man's thoughts walking in the silent darkness. (qtd. in Buell 134)

Barrymore apparently captured not only the illusion of the first time, but also that sense of the actor speaking out loud to himself advocated by Hazlitt and deemed
impossible by Lamb. Woolcott's impression that Barrymore's Hamlet was "lonely" and immersed in "silent darkness" also suggests that the actor had successfully created that "circle of concentration" which allowed him to betray no awareness of those watching him. This suggestion is born out by a passage in Richard Boleslavsky's charming book, Acting: The First Six Lessons, fashioned as a dialogue between Boleslavsky himself and the Pretty Creature of eighteen who comes to him to learn the art of acting:

The Creature: I saw John Barrymore from the wings when he was playing Hamlet.

I: What impressed you chiefly as you watched him?

The Creature: He was marvelous!!

I: I know that, but what else?

The Creature: He paid no attention to me. (20)

Boleslavsky goes on to explain to the neophyte actress that, in shutting out all the external distractions surrounding him, Barrymore "was acting in his work as the pilot would, the scientist, or the architect--he was concentrating," exercising "the quality which permits us to direct all our spiritual and intellectual forces towards one definite object and to continue as long as it pleases us to do so" (20).
It would seem, then, that an actor can maintain concentration and identification with a character, while either entirely excluding the audience from his "circle of attention," as Barrymore did, or including them within that circle, even to the point of addressing them directly, without necessarily compromising either concentration or identification. In fact, the exploration of the character's relationship to the "included" audience can be an additional defining feature of the performance. Lamb, however, does not anticipate any such fruitful interplay between actor and audience. He argues, on the contrary, that the actor's consciousness of the spectators frequently quells creativity and forces the performer to adopt the most obvious, superficial interpretations of the text in order to please the masses. He finds this to be particularly true of Hamlet in his scene with Ophelia:

All the Hamlets that I have ever seen, rant and rave at her as if she had committed some great crime, and the audience are highly pleased, because the words of the part are satirical, and they are enforced by the strongest expression of satirical indignation of which the face and voice are capable. (1: 120)

Lamb may well have been justified in his complaints about the Hamlets up to his day, though he was not the only
one who took exception to such brutal treatment of Ophelia. One critic for *The Examiner* was far from pleased at John Philip Kemble's behavior towards his Ophelia:

In what manner did he treat the fair Ophelia? What threatening of fists, what ferocity of voice, what stamping of feet, what clattering of doors? Had there been one spark of chivalry left among us, the pit and boxes would have sprung on to the stage and dashed to earth the insolent intruder who could so insult a lovely and harmless woman. (qtd. in Buell 51)

Lamb is not perturbed simply because Hamlet shows a lack of chivalry, but because such a presentation of Hamlet is a fundamental misreading of the character. Lamb is at pains to remind us of Hamlet's deepest feelings for Ophelia:

The truth is, that in all such deep affections as had subsisted between Hamlet and Ophelia, there is a stock of supererogatory love, (if I may venture to use the expression) which in any great grief of heart, especially where that which preys upon the mind cannot be communicated, confers a kind of indulgence upon the grieved party to express itself, even to its heart's dearest object, in the language of a temporary alienation. (1: 120)
However harsh Hamlet's language may be toward Ophelia, Lamb argues, "it is not anger, but grief assuming the appearance of anger,—love awkwardly counterfeiting hate, as sweet countenances when they try to frown" (1: 120). Lamb's psychology may be a bit simplistic here, for he seems to imply that because Hamlet loves Ophelia, he cannot at the same time be angry with her, and that hatred cannot arise against a beloved even when betrayal is suspected. But he does show a sensitivity to the complexities of the scene that the actors of his day, or Kemble at least, lacked. Lamb, it should be noted, was not the first to recognize this failing in the traditional stage interpretation of the scene. In 1772 an anonymous critic, assuming the pseudonym "Hic et Ubique," wrote on this very theme for the St. James Chronicle:

It is not natural to think that Hamlet in love with Ophelia would be too rough with her—she had done nothing to deserve it, and it is the best distinction of feigned, from true madness, that he would choose from his feelings to support it with as little outrage as possible to her he loves; of the two ways in his power, he would naturally choose that which would give her and himself the least pain. (qtd. in Buell 22)
Not only were there critics before Lamb who had sensed this ambivalence in Hamlet, but there was soon to be an actor willing to go against tradition and audience expectation to portray these complexities on the stage. In 1814, two years after publication of Lamb's essay, Edmund Kean achieved his tremendous success as Hamlet. One of the most hailed moments in any of his roles occurred in this scene. Kean's biographer, F. W. Hawkins, described the actor's innovation:

Deviating with unimpeachable propriety from the conventional coarseness and almost brutal ferocity with which the scene had been represented, the actor imparted to it a vein of tenderness which he conceived it impossible to repress, and so rescued the Dane from the charge of inflicting undeserved pangs on the gentle and ingenuous object of his affections. (1: 185)

Kean's main innovation, coming at the end of the scene, has been recorded in minute detail:

Edmund Kean, as Hamlet, after concluding his words to Ophelia, 'To a nunnery, go!' and departing abruptly out of sight of his audience, used to come on the stage again, and approach slowly the amazed Ophelia still remaining in the center; take her hand gently, and, after gazing steadily and
earnestly in her face for a few seconds, and with a marked expression of tenderness on his own countenance, appeared to be choked in his efforts to say something, smothered her hand with passionate kisses, and rushed wildly and finally from her presence. (Hackett 49)

Kean may have gotten the idea, not to mention the courage, to make such an innovation, from Lamb's essay—it is clear that he had read it at least by the time of his portrayal of Lear six years later, for it was this same essay which inspired Kean to restore that play's tragic ending. Another possibility, although it does not seem to have been noted before, is that Kean found the germ of this piece of business in an earlier scene, in which Ophelia describes Hamlet's unexpected entry into her closet, along with his seizing of her wrist, lengthy perusal of her face, and distracted exit after uttering no more than a piteous sigh. Whatever the source of Kean's inspiration, the moment proved one of the most memorable of his phenomenally successful career. Hazlitt said of it:

It had an electrical effect on the house. It was the finest commentary that was ever made on Shakespeare. It explained the character at once (as he meant it), as one of disappointed hope, of bitter regret, of affection suspended, not
obliterated, by the distractions of the scene around him! (14)

If this one silent moment was truly "the finest commentary ever made on Shakespeare," then a single acting choice can be a more profound expression of Hamlet's "supererogatory love" than any of Lamb's writings on the subject. And however novel the choice may have been, it still produced the "electrical effect on the house" described by Hazlitt. The audience proved as capable as Kean of understanding the hidden feelings behind the harsh words.

What Kean initiated, subsequent Hamlets have emulated, without thereby losing the applause of audiences or critics. Indeed, many of the greatest actors have earned some of their most lavish praise for their ability to convey the tender feelings beneath Hamlet's cold facade. William Macready displayed a similar tenderness towards Ophelia, noted in a review by John Forster, a friend of Lamb's:

His scene with Ophelia was truly exquisite. It was the realization of Mr. Lamb's opinion, that the scene is a profound artifice of love, an attempt to alienate Ophelia by affected discourtesies, so as to prepare her mind for breaking off of that loving intercourse, which can no longer find a place amidst business so serious as that which he has to do. (Forster 644)
Henry Irving's Hamlet "was carefully conceived and notable in its essential humanness, especially in its tenderness toward Ophelia" (Buell 97). One reviewer exclaimed over his performance, "But best of all he loves Ophelia. How few Hamlets show this! They bully, they rave at, they ill-treat her, and curse her. They do not love her" (Scott 187).

The Italian actor Tommaso Salvini, famous for his Othello, was never a noted Hamlet, but his playing of the scene with Ophelia at least won praise:

The scene with Ophelia was a revelation. Instead of roaring and scolding at her like other actors, with a fierce rudeness which is all the more incomprehensible that they do not represent Hamlet as mad, Salvini is strange, enigmatical, but always tender; and his "To a nunnery go" is the mournful advice of a broken-hearted lover, not the insult of a bully or angry pedagogue. (Lewes 231)

Edwin Booth was also famous for the soft feelings he showed his Ophelia:

His exquisite tenderness towards Ophelia, to whom the words, 'Go to a nunnery,' were uttered as the warning advice of a man who really loved her, and not as indignant denunciation, was such as to reach every heart. (Simpson 353)
Booth also answered a similar objection Lamb had voiced to Hamlet's treatment of Polonius. Again Lamb chided actors who coarsen Hamlet by taking the text at its most obvious face value:

They make him express a vulgar scorn at Polonius which utterly degrades his gentility, and which no explanation can render palatable; they make him shew contempt, and curl up the nose at Ophelia's father,--contempt in its very grossest and most hateful form; but they get applause by it . . . (1: 120)

But Booth showed that this tradition too was not insurmountable, as Charles Townsend Copeland points out in his biography of the actor:

After years of the usual sardonic tone towards Polonius, Booth's Hamlet came to recognize that, though the Lord Chamberlain is a tedious old man, he is also Ophelia's father. (qtd. in Buell 82)

It is worth noting that all of the encomiums above not only praise the performances in similar terms (four out of the five descriptions of the Ophelia scene use the word "tender" or a variant), but also imply that the common run of actors, in each period, still play the straightforward, surface brutality Lamb so objected to. Perhaps the mediocre actor, in any era, too easily falls to the temptation,
either to lose touch with the character entirely in an
effort to woo the audience, or at best to resort to
superficial or traditional interpretations for fear of
upsetting the status quo. But it is clear that in each
generation there have been actors who refused to allow the
audience's preconceptions to dictate their choices, and who
had both the talent and the technique to lead that audience
beyond conventional understandings of the role. This
ability of the actor to provide new insights into
Shakespeare's characters, and the nature of Shakespearean
characterization itself, will be considered in the next
chapter.
CHAPTER II

"A FINE ABSTRACTION":

MACBETH

Lamb's reservations about the actor-audience relationship could apply to any dramatic text. But he also maintains that Shakespeare has unique qualities which make the theatrical representation of his plays especially problematic:

I mean no disrespect to any actor, but the sort of pleasure which Shakspeare's plays give in the acting seems to me not at all to differ from that which the audience receive from those of other writers; and they being in themselves essentially so different from all others, I must conclude that there is something in the nature of acting which levels all distinctions. (1: 121)

Lamb had already made the same argument in connection with Hamlet, maintaining that if the play in its basic outline were rewritten by George Lillo--a writer Lamb considered second-rate--and thereby lost all of the characteristic genius of Shakespeare, it would be no less
pleasing to an audience simply by virtue of its more melodramatic elements. In Lamb's eyes, Shakespeare's inherent superiority to other playwrights is obscured in the theatre. He elaborates on this point by examining some of the most famous roles of Mrs. Sarah Siddons, the leading tragic actress of the day:

Who does not . . . praise the Mrs. Beverley in the same way as the Lady Macbeth of Mrs. S.? Belvidera, and Calista, and Isabella, and Euphrasia, are they less liked than Imogen, or than Juliet, or than Desdemona? Are they not spoken of and remembered in the same way? Is not the female performer as great (as they call it) in one as in the other? (1: 121)

Lamb holds that an actor can please an audience just as successfully in a non-Shakespearean role as in a Shakespearean. A treatise on acting from his own day would seem to corroborate the claim. In his *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* of 1806, the Reverend Gilbert Austin provides drawings of gestures employed by Mrs. Siddons in a variety of roles, including Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserved*, Euphrasia in Murphy's *The Grecian Daughter*, and Calista in Rowe's *The Fair Penitent*, all mentioned above by Lamb, along with such Shakespearean parts as Constance in *King John* and Imogen in *Cymbeline*. 
Austin gives no indication that he sees any incongruity in the association of Shakespeare with these other playwrights, or that the "complex significant gestures" being illustrated in these drawings are any less adequate as embodiments of the Shakespeare characters than of the others (495). Such casual juxtapositions as this might well have caused Lamb to feel justified in his claim that "acting levels all distinctions."

Lamb has suggested that there is something essentially different about Shakespeare's plays which distinguishes him from other playwrights. Earlier in his essay he gives a clue to this distinction. He begins by praising Mrs. Siddons, along with her equally famous brother, John Philip Kemble:

Never let me be so ungrateful as to forget the very high degree of satisfaction which I received some years back from seeing for the first time a tragedy of Shakespeare performed, in which those two great performers sustained the principle parts. It seemed to embody and realize conceptions which had hitherto assumed no distinct shape. (1: 114)

Judging by his later references to both these performers throughout the essay, it is likely that the performance Lamb refers to here was of Macbeth, a play in
which Mrs. Siddons in particular won widespread praise. But although he can freely acknowledge the genius of a performer of Mrs. Siddons' caliber, Lamb's very next words express the heart of his objection to Shakespeare on stage:

But dearly do we pay all our life after for this juvenile pleasure, this sense of distinctness. When the novelty is past, we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood. We have let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance.

(1: 114-15)

For Lamb, a Shakespeare play is not a blueprint for the material realization of performance, but an "idea," a "vision," a "dream." Elsewhere in his essay he says that the reading of a Shakespeare tragedy is "a fine abstraction," of which a staged performance can be no more than an imperfect realization (1: 129). Thus Lamb holds a Platonic view of Shakespeare's works, seeing them as timeless abstractions and static objects of contemplation. He applies this view specifically to characterization, maintaining that Shakespeare's characters are "the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions" (1: 123). He illustrates his point with Macbeth's "dagger of the mind" soliloquy before the murder
of Duncan. Watching John Philip Kemble perform this moment, Lamb was caught up in "the painful anxiety about the act" (1: 124), and actually found himself wishing to prevent it. Such feelings, Lamb maintains, are far removed from the contemplative response of the reader, who largely ignores the particulars of the dramatic situation:

The deed doing never presses upon us with the painful sense of presence: it rather seems to belong to history,—to something past and inevitable, if it has any thing to do with time at all. (1: 124)

This timeless, abstract quality is what Lamb finds so antithetical to the concrete, material representation on stage. Other critics have noted Lamb's conception of Shakespeare's characters as "Platonic ideas" (Bate 83) and Lamb's own "Platonic distrust of actors" (Booth 21). Lamb himself does not use the term in this essay; it is interesting that on the one occasion he does employ it in reference to the theatre, in his 1822 essay "On the Acting of Munden," it is to praise the comic actor Joseph Munden, of whom Lamb asks, "Can any man wonder, like him?" (2: 170):

A tub of butter, contemplated by him, amounts to a Platonic idea. He understands a leg of mutton in its quiddity. He stands wondering, amid the common-place materials of life, like primaeval man with the sun and stars about him. (2: 170)
Here Lamb suggests, perhaps a bit hyperbolically, that the actor can somehow extract a kind of abstract essence from the simple stage properties he comes in contact with. But Munden was a comic actor, and Sylvan Barnet has pointed out the crucial distinctions Lamb draws between comedy and tragedy. Though Munden may have provided fleeting glimpses of a Platonic ideal behind the theatrical illusion, Lamb apparently holds that such brief hints are insufficient to illuminate the entirely ideal world of Shakespeare.

If one accepts Lamb's almost metaphysical view, it is hard to argue on behalf of the theatre. But it can be demonstrated that it is actually Lamb's conception of Shakespeare's characters, rather than what he calls the "strait-lacing actuality" of the theatre (1: 115), which is limiting and inadequate. Furthermore, a challenge to Lamb's view can be found in the very performance he criticizes.

Near the end of his essay, Lamb singles out Mrs. Siddons' portrayal of Lady Macbeth, one of her most famous roles. He refers specifically to the banquet scene, in which the newly crowned Macbeth and his wife entertain the Scottish nobles, only to have the evening disrupted when Macbeth sees, among the revelers, the ghost of Banquo, whom he has had secretly murdered. Lamb notes that Mrs. Siddons reaped great praise for her performance in this scene, especially her manner of dismissing the confused and increasingly suspicious guests. He then goes on to say:
But does such a trifle as this enter into the imaginations of the readers of that wild and wonderful scene? Does not the mind dismiss the feasters as rapidly as it can? Does it care about the gracefulness of the doing it? But by acting, and judging of acting, all these nonessentials are raised into an importance, injurious to the main interest of the play. (1: 129)

Lamb's designation of certain of Mrs. Siddon's actions as "nonessentials" is highly questionable in itself. He seems to imply that at least some physical actions only suggested by the text should not be allowed undue prominence, without providing any criteria for judging what is or is not "essential." Shakespeare himself on occasion has elevated what on the surface would seem to be nonessentials--small, seemingly insignificant actions--to tremendous importance. Stanislavski points this out:

With what is Lady Macbeth occupied at the culminating point of her tragedy? The simple physical act of washing a spot of blood off her hand. . . . In real life also many of the great moments of emotion are signalized by some ordinary, small, natural movement. (8)

Since Shakespeare himself has directed the actress playing Lady Macbeth to make dramatic capital out of the
simple act of washing her hands, it may be asked how Lamb can deny Mrs. Siddons the right to employ the same kind of dramatic heightening to activities which, if not so clearly underlined in Shakespeare's text, nevertheless are clearly called for.

Any judgment as to whether Mrs. Siddons was really engaged in "nonessentials" and had strayed from "the main interest of the play" would benefit from an examination of both the way this scene was perceived by the audience and of Mrs. Siddons' own intentions in playing it. Fortunately, both kinds of data are available. Professor George Joseph Bell took notes on Mrs. Siddons' performance of the role in Edinburgh in 1809. Bell's notes were printed in 1887 by H. C. Fleeming Jenkin, who provided some valuable commentary of his own. And Mrs. Siddons' own "Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth," including an account of her playing of the banquet scene, are preserved in the biography by Thomas Campbell, published in 1834. These two sources provide a fairly detailed reconstruction of Mrs. Siddons' performance of the banquet scene and a challenge to Lamb's conception of Shakespearean characters.

Lamb has argued that a grasp of the "essential" Shakespeare must come through reading, but as Jonathan Ades has perceptively remarked, "it would be fair to point out that any actor must begin his understanding of a play by
reading a script, so that in that sense reading is basic to acting" (524). Judging by Mrs. Siddons' own account, she was an intensely responsive, imaginative reader of the play and the role long before she developed her definitive interpretation. In her biography she gives an account of the first time she was to play Lady Macbeth, at the age of twenty. She had shut herself away to read the play alone after her family had retired for the evening, but was soon so caught up in the terrors of the story that she could not read any further than the assassination scene:

I snatched up my candle and hurried out of the room in a paroxysm of terror. My dress was of silk, and the rustling of it, as I ascended the stairs to go to bed, seemed to my panic-struck fancy like the movement of a spectre pursuing me. At last I reached my chamber, where I found my husband fast asleep. I clapt my candlestick down upon the table, without the power of putting the candle out, and threw myself on my bed, without daring to stay even to take off my clothes.

(Campbell 134)

This passage demonstrates a point Lamb never seems to consider, that great actors are great in large part because they are the kind of responsive, imaginative readers he champions. Furthermore, in one of his earliest poems, Lamb
as much as admits Mrs. Siddons' ability to convey her terrifying experience to an audience:

As when a child on some long winter's night
Affrighted clinging to its Grandam's knees
With eager wond'ring and perturb'd delight
Listens strange tales of fearful dark decrees
Mutter'd to wretch by necromantic spell;
Or of those hags, who at the witching time
Of murky midnight ride the air sublime,
And mingle foul embrace with fiends of Hell:
Cold Horror drinks its blood! Anon the tear
More gentle starts, to hear the Beldame tell
Of pretty babes, that lov'd each other dear,
Murder'd by cruel Uncle's mandate fell:
Ev'n such the shiv'ring joys thy tones impart,
Ev'n so thou, SIDDONS! meltest my sad heart!
(4: 4)

While the reference to the two boys murdered by their uncle seems a clear reflection of the situation of Richard III, the foul, midnight hags strongly suggest Macbeth. Lamb's sonnet, written in late 1794, may well have been composed after seeing Mrs. Siddons in the part of Lady Macbeth, a role she performed at Drury Lane sixteen times that year (Hogan 1638). Lamb's whole tone in describing the effect of Mrs. Siddons' performance upon him is markedly
similar to her own response to reading *Macbeth*--like being terrified by a ghost story told late at night. Lamb compares her performance to hearing a story, an activity which resembles reading in its reliance upon the reader/listener's imagination, and thereby shows the extent to which the actress was able to assimilate her own reader response into her performance.

It is also worth noting that onstage Mrs. Siddons carried this imaginative involvement to an unbroken concentration on the imaginary circumstances of the play. There was no question of the kind of pandering to the audience already discussed. The account of Mrs. Siddons given by Professor Bell shows an actress giving undivided concentration to her role:

> Mrs. Siddons is not before an audience. Her mind wrought up in high conception of her part, her eye never wandering, never for a moment idle, passion and sentiment continually betraying themselves. (Matthews 81)

In her remarks on the banquet scene, Mrs. Siddons describes her personal view of the changes befalling the ambitious and murderous Lady Macbeth once she and her husband have obtained the throne:

> The golden round of royalty now crowns her brow, and royal robes enfold her form; but the peace
which passeth all understanding is lost to her forever [sic], and the worm that never dies already gnaws her heart. (Campbell 128)

This idea of the character's growing despair informs Mrs. Siddons' playing of the entire banquet scene:

> Under the impression of her present wretchedness, I, from this moment, have always assumed the dejection of countenance and manners which I thought accordant to such a state of mind; and, though the author of this sublime composition has not, it must be acknowledged, given any direction whatever to authorize this assumption, yet I venture to hope that he would not have disapproved of it. (Campbell 128)

Already it should be noted that Mrs. Siddons is not merely concerned with the "low tricks upon eye and ear" condemned by Lamb (1: 113), but has formed her own specific conception of the character's state of mind. This conception, moreover, can only find its full realization in performance since, as Mrs. Siddons herself points out, it is not made explicit in Shakespeare's text.

As the scene begins and the guests arrive, Macbeth is invited to take the remaining empty seat at table. But where the guests see only vacancy, the terrified Macbeth, along with the theatre audience, sees the bloody ghost of
the murdered Banquo. Professor Bell's note on Mrs. Siddons' performance indicates that, as her Lady Macbeth sits silently, "her secret uneasiness is very fine. Suppressed, but agitating her whole frame" (Matthews 92). Mrs. Siddons confirms this impression in her own remarks:

Although, through the greater part of this scene, Lady Macbeth affects to resume her wonted domination over her husband, yet, notwithstanding all this self-control, her mind must even then be agonized by the complicated pangs of terror and remorse. (Campbell 129-30)

Macbeth, forgetting himself in terror, cries aloud to the ghost, "Never shake / Thy gory locks at me" (3.4.50-51). Of Mrs. Siddons at this point, Bell says, "During all this a growing uneasiness in her; at last she rises and speaks" (Matthews 92). With the lines "Sit, worthy friends:--my lord is often thus, / And hath been from his youth" (3.4.53-54), she tries to calm the assembly, even while she is near panic herself. Mrs. Siddons says of this moment:

What imagination can conceive her tremors lest at every succeeding moment Macbeth, in his distraction, may confirm those suspicions, but ill-concealed under the loyal looks and cordial manners of their facile courtiers? (Campbell 130)
In an attempt to prevent any further outbursts from her husband, she draws him apart, demanding of him "Are you a man?" (3.4.58). Bell notes that Mrs. Siddons "comes up to him and catches his hand. Voice suppressed" (Matthews 93), while the actress herself records that she delivered the line "with smothered terror, yet domineering indignation" (Campbell 130). As Macbeth continues to tremble with fear, his wife, according to Bell, becomes "peevish and scornful" (Matthews 93) as she berates him with reminders of his earlier hallucinations:

O, proper stuff!
This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger, which, you said,
Led you to Duncan. (3.4.60-63)

Her efforts to bring him back to his senses prove useless. The line "Why do you make such faces? When all's done, / You look but on a stool" (3.4.67-68) is delivered, according to Bell, "In his ear, as if to bring him back to objects of common life. Her anxiety makes you creep with apprehension: uncertain how to act. Her emotion keeps you breathless" (Matthews 93).

At last the ghost exits, and Macbeth seems to regain some of his composure. He faces his wife with the words, "If I stand here, I saw him," to which she only replies "Fie, for shame!" (3.4.74) Here Bell records that this line
is whispered, as she returns to her seat, presumably to try
to salvage the festivities (Matthews 93).

All goes well for a few moments, but soon Macbeth sees
the ghost once again and begins to challenge it in rage and
terror. Bell says of Lady Macbeth that "her secret agony
again agitates her" (Matthews 93). But in her own remarks,
it appears that at some point in her continuing study of the
role Mrs. Siddons hit upon an innovation for this second
appearance of the ghost which allowed her to heighten the
character's secret agony all the more. Pointing to a
previous scene to demonstrate Lady Macbeth's knowledge of
and silent culpability in the murder of Banquo, Mrs. Siddons
says:

I have imagined that the last appearance of
Banquo's ghost became no less visible to her eyes
than it became to those of her husband. Yes, the
spirit of the noble Banquo has smingly filled
up, even to overflowing, and now commends to her
own lips, the ingredients of her poisoned chalice.
(Campbell 131-32)

It has been pointed out that there is no clear evidence
to indicate that Mrs. Siddons ever actually employed this
choice in performance (Bartholomeusz 116). But the choice,
whether actually performed or not, is in keeping with her
overall conception of Lady Macbeth being ever more assailed
by the horrors she has helped perpetrate.
Even at this height of terror, Lady Macbeth retains the presence of mind to put on a false face for the guests. Bell reports that she "Rises and speaks sweetly to the company" (Matthews 93). Mrs. Siddons says of this moment:

Dying with fear, yet assuming the utmost composure, she returns to her stately canopy, and with trembling nerves, having tottered up the steps to her throne, that bad eminence, she entertains her wondering guests with frightful smiles, with over-acted attention, and with fitful graciousness; painfully, yet incessantly, labouring to divert their attention from her husband. (Campbell 130)

But as she grows increasingly distraught, Bell notes that she "descends in great eagerness; voice almost choked with anxiety to prevent their questioning; alarm, hurry, rapid and convulsive as if afraid he should tell of the murder of Duncan" (Matthews 94). Finally, she is able to direct the fearful and suspicious guests out of the chamber.

At last the two conspirators are left alone in the silent hall. While Macbeth plans his next move, his lady says surprisingly little. When asked by her husband what time of night it is, she replies, "Almost at odds with morning, which is which" (3.4 127). Bell notes that Mrs. Siddons' delivery of the line is "Very sorrowful. Quite
exhausted" (Matthews 94). Finally, as she consoles her husband with the words, "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (3.4.141), she is "Feeble now, and as if preparing for her last sickness and final doom" (Matthews 95).

Bell, who had never read Mrs. Siddons' remarks, nonetheless perceived her intentions for the character through watching the performance. He says of this scene that "the flagging of her spirit, the melancholy and dismal blank beginning to steal upon her, is one of the finest lessons of the drama" (Matthews 80). In publishing Bell's notes later in the century, Fleeming Jenkin, who had the opportunity to read Mrs. Siddons' comments, agrees with her view that such an interpretation is "more the creation of Siddons than of Shakespeare. There is nothing in the text to contradict it, but little to indicate it" (Matthews 80-81). Here, it would seem, the actress has made at least one contribution that is far from a "nonessential," but gets at the very essence of the character. The creeping despair with which Mrs. Siddons invests the character, culminating in Lady Macbeth's also seeing the ghost of the murdered Banquo, not only better prepares the audience for her later mad scene, but presents an entirely different side of the woman too often seen up to Mrs. Siddons' day as a one-dimensional monster. By conveying through performance an interpretation of the character which legitimately
extends beyond the letter of Shakespeare's text, Mrs. Siddons challenges Lamb's assertion that only the reader can arrive at a "true" experience of Shakespeare's characters.

Elsewhere in his essay, Lamb furthers his Platonic argument against Mrs. Siddons' Lady Macbeth. He worries that the common theatre-goer will come to mistake the image of a particular actor for that of the character. We "identify in our minds in a perverse manner, the actor with the character he represents" (1: 114). Lamb goes on to say more specifically, "We speak of Lady Macbeth, while we are in reality thinking of Mrs. S." (1: 114). Lamb laments, "How cruelly this operates upon the mind, to have its free conceptions thus crampt and pressed down to the measure of a strait-lacing actuality" (1: 115). This concern also stems directly from Lamb's Platonic conception of Shakespeare's characters. While the reader contemplates a timeless, abstract image, the theatre spectator accepts an imperfect copy tied arbitrarily to the physical quirks of an individual performer. This preference for an imagined ideal of the character over any actor's embodiment was shared by Coleridge:

He never saw any of Shakespeare's plays performed, but with a degree of pain, disgust, and indignation. He had seen Mrs. Siddons as Lady, and Kemble as Macbeth:--these might be the
Macbeths of the Kembles, but they were not the Macbeths of Shakespeare. (2: 230)

In an 1833 letter to Samuel Rogers, Lamb makes a similar objection to the attaching of Shakespeare's characters to a fixed visual embodiment, as he complains about paintings of these characters:

What injury (short of the theatres) did not Boydell's "Shakespeare Gallery" do me with Shakespeare? to have Opie's Shakespeare, Northcote's Shakespeare, light-headed Fuseli's Shakespeare, heavy-headed Romney's Shakespeare, wooden-headed West's Shakespeare . . . instead of my, and everybody's Shakespeare! To be tied down to an authentic face of Juliet! To have Imogen's portrait! To confine the illimitable! (6: 985)

While Lamb demonstrates an understandable reluctance to be tied to any particular visual image of Shakespeare's characters, he lapses into a strange inconsistency in apparently equating his own personal vision with "everybody's Shakespeare." As in Coleridge's comment above, the contention that any particular incarnation of Shakespeare, either on stage or canvas, is not the true Shakespeare, seems to imply that Lamb is part of a select circle which knows exactly what that true Shakespeare is. It is such an elitist stance, not the theatre, which "confines the illimitable."
As for Mrs. Siddons' portrayal of Lady Macbeth, there is actually some justice to Lamb's claim that an audience would come to accept no other image of the character. Thomas Campbell, the actress's biographer, claimed that neither "the memory of the old, or the imagination of the young" could conceive of a substitute for Mrs. Siddons in the role of Lady Macbeth: "The moment she seized the part, she identified her image with it in the minds of the living generation" (140). But strangely enough, Mrs. Siddons herself saw the part quite differently from the way she played it. Acknowledging that her own performances might make it difficult for people to imagine the character any other way, she nonetheless maintained that Lady Macbeth should be "fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile" (Campbell 124). She furthers her argument:

Such a combination only, respectable in energy and strength of mind, and captivating in feminine loveliness, could have composed a charm of such potency as to fascinate the mind of a hero so dauntless, a character so amiable, so honourable as Macbeth. (Campbell 124)

Although at least one scholar has argued that "Lady Macbeth's beauty may have been a way of rationalising a fact which Mrs. Siddons had no way of avoiding" (Bartholomeusz 100), few would argue that Sarah Siddons had either this
physical appearance or gave this interpretation to the role. She herself seems to have acknowledged this:

You will probably not agree with me as to the character of that beauty; yet perhaps, this difference of opinion will be entirely attributable to the difficulty of your imagination disengaging itself from that idea of the person of her representative which you have been so long accustomed to contemplate. (Campbell 123-24)

Her tall, imposing physique, commanding eye and imperious tones were well known, and Byron for one said of her feminine allure that he would as soon think of going to bed with the Archbishop of Canterbury as with Mrs. Siddons (Manvell 342). One may doubt the validity of Mrs. Siddons' conception; certainly her biographer Campbell did:

Mrs. Siddons' idea of her having been a delicate and blonde beauty, seems to me to be a pure caprice. The public would have ill exchanged such a representative of Lady Macbeth, for the dark locks and the eagle eye of Mrs. Siddons. (140)

On the other hand, it might be argued that there can be more than one image of Lady Macbeth, and that Mrs. Siddons' ideal of the character could be effectively realized by another actress. One need only consider the success of the 1955 Stratford Macbeth with Laurence Olivier, widely hailed
as one of the great productions of the play this century. It would be difficult to imagine a more feminine, fair, or fragile Lady Macbeth than Vivien Leigh. It is noted particularly that "she eschewed Siddons' grandeur, and kept Lady Macbeth to a small scale" (Mullin 250). The reviewer for the Daily Mail spoke of "her frail, porcelain beauty" (qtd. in Mullin 250). This physical beauty was accentuated by designer Roger Furse's form-fitting costumes, with navel and shadow lines under the breasts actually painted on to highlight the actress's sensuality. Not all who witnessed the production were able to accept this image of Lady Macbeth; an Evening Standard reviewer found Vivien Leigh "too beautiful and fragile for anyone to take seriously her cry to be unsexed and filled with direst cruelty" (qtd. in Bartholomeusz 258). But others found that such a characterization provided new insights into the play, that "in her sensual beauty there was ample explanation for Macbeth's fascination" (Mullin 250). This led to some gains, as Ivor Brown pointed out in Drama: "Rarely does one feel in this play that Macbeth and his Lady were lovers before they were criminals. This time we know it" (qtd. in Mullin 250).

Whether one agrees with Mrs. Siddons' image of Lady Macbeth or not, the point, as Fleeming Jenkin makes clear in his commentary on the actress' notes, is that "here we have
a great actress forming two distinct conceptions" (Matthews 80). Lamb's single Platonic ideal is replaced by a plurality of equally viable interpretations. Jenkin never mentions Charles Lamb, but might well have had him in mind in the following passage:

We are apt to imagine that there is some one Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, a creature of Shakespeare's brain, an *eidolon* which the actor must of necessity endeavor to represent, his success being measured by the approach which he makes to this unattainable ideal. (Matthews 76)

Jenkin, however, steeped in theatrical tradition, realized the falseness of such a view:

Each new actor of real merit re-creates the persons of the older drama, sending traditions to the winds and producing a new person on the stage . . . there is not merely one good way of representing a great part, but as many ways as there are great actors. (Matthews 76)

Jenkin's arguments are echoed in Michael Booth's more recent study of the relationship between theatre and literary criticism. Booth also points out that "it is impossible then to speak of a 'definitive' performance of any text or any character or any speech," and goes on to say that "performance is accumulative, as is our experience of
it. Working in the theatre or going to it is a collector's art" (18). Lamb's Platonic Shakespeare is a sign of his own elitist prejudice. A Shakespearean character, like any dramatic character, is a conglomeration of associations, which in Shakespeare's case have been accumulating over the centuries. "Lady Macbeth," like "Hamlet" or "Lear," is not a single idea, but a kaleidoscopic amalgam of all that men have thought, felt and said about the character. The work of an artist, and particularly that of a playwright, is community property: it both defines and is defined by the society in which it exists. The theatrical tradition--the illuminating images and actions chosen by actors, directors and designers as they interpret Shakespeare's texts--make up a significant part of that cumulative experience we call Macbeth. Thus, if there is any "truth" about Lady Macbeth, or Hamlet, or Lear, it is not the truth of one reader alone in the privacy of a study, but the myriad, groping truths discovered by humanity as a whole coming to terms with Shakespeare's challenging vision. And the records of Mrs. Siddons' performance provide ample testimony to the contribution an actor can make to that growing understanding.
CHAPTER III

"THE ACTUAL SIGHT OF THE THING":

OTHELLO

While Lamb can argue that there is something essentially abstract about a Shakespearean character for which any physical representation is inadequate, he can also maintain conversely that there are some characters for whom stage representation is too vividly accurate:

But how many dramatic personages are there in Shakespeare, which . . . from some circumstance, some adjunct to their character, are improper to be shewn to our bodily eye? (1: 125)

As Barnet points out, "Lamb maintains that an object which in reality is painful will be painful if too closely reproduced" (1156). To demonstrate his point, Lamb considers the situation of Othello, a mixed marriage between a Moorish general and the daughter of a Venetian senator. As a reader, Lamb is enamoured of this unconventional match:

Nothing can be more soothing, more flattering to the nobler parts of our natures, than to read of a young Venetian lady of highest extraction, through
the force of love and from a sense of merit in him whom she loved, laying aside every consideration of kindred, and country, and colour, and wedding with a coal-black Moor . . . (1: 125)

Lamb calls this daring act of Desdemona "the perfect triumph of virtue over accidents, of the imagination over the senses" (1: 125). That last phrase suggests that Lamb may have found Desdemona's action not only inspiring in itself, but emblematic of his whole argument in favor of the reader's imagination over the playgoer's senses. Indeed, when Lamb turns to consider the effect of Othello in the playhouse, he envisions the senses scoring a dubious victory over the imagination:

But upon the stage, when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty, but we are left to our poor unassisted senses, I appeal to every one that has seen Othello played, whether he did not, on the contrary, sink Othello's mind in his colour; whether he did not find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; and whether the actual sight of the thing did not outweigh all that beautiful compromise which we make in reading.

(1: 125)
Lamb goes on to explain that the theatre audience is presented with just enough of the external realities of the situation to be made uncomfortable by it, while at the same time they are unable to perceive the internal motives which ennoble the otherwise questionable union.

In a way, the example of Othello is unfortunate, for it distracts attention from what is otherwise a challenging argument and forces the reader to focus instead on the racism of Lamb's era, a racism which it is painful to see Lamb himself succumb to. Even Lamb's approval of the marriage when reading the play, his "beautiful compromise," cannot escape the taint of bigotry. There is a kind of terrible hypocrisy in "soothing" and "flattering" ourselves by reading about a mixed marriage which we would nevertheless find revolting to see represented. Lamb does not consider whether the reader should be encouraged to congratulate himself this way, safely hidden away from the thing he cannot bear to look at.

Lamb is aware of the apparent inconsistency in his position, but cautions his readers against "the error of supposing that because Othello's colour does not offend us in the reading, it should also not offend us in the seeing" (1: 126). By way of analogy, he compares reading about Adam and Eve in Milton's poem with seeing them in a painting:
In the poem we for a while have Paradisaical senses given us, which vanish when we see a man and his wife without clothes in the picture. (1: 126)

Lamb points out that painters, on the other hand, have been forced, "by a sort of prophetic anachronism" (1: 126), to represent Adam and Eve, even in their unfallen state, as modestly dressed in fig leaves.

Lamb extends this Adam and Eve analogy by employing it again later in the essay, when speaking of the impossibility of representing the magic island of The Tempest on stage. There he maintains that "the Garden of Eden, with our first parents in it, is not more impossible to be shewn on a stage, than the Enchanted Isle" (1: 128). In discussing the impossibility of representing Adam and Eve on stage, Lamb might well have furthered his argument by mentioning the reluctance of playwrights to dramatize Milton's Paradise Lost. The one abortive attempt up to Lamb's time, that of Dryden, has yet to be performed in any format other than a puppet show (Summers 621), and even though Dryden may have intended his State of Innocence as no more than a closet drama, he still felt compelled to clothe his Eve by way of a stage direction describing her as "habited" (Verrall 225).

It would seem that, in his analogy, Lamb has found at least one clear instance where what impresses us in the
reading could only embarrass us on stage. And yet, even nudity is no longer an unbreachable taboo on stage, though it still probably cannot help being a significant distraction. Certainly it is no more than a matter of social convention; attitudes toward nudity, like those toward racial minorities, change over the course of time. And even accepting Lamb's argument about the inhabitants of Eden, the analogy between Adam and Eve and Othello is tenuous at best. With the possible exception of a small handful of nudists, people do not generally feel themselves oppressed by the idea that nudity, while a part of our private moments, is subject to very specific restrictions and should be kept in its place. But the idea that members of certain racial minorities should stay "in their place" has much more sinister implications, and the attempt to confine a mixed marriage between the covers of a book is something more than a mere observance of decorum. Furthermore, looking at Paradise Lost and Othello more specifically, the situations of the two stories are different. Nudity is far from the most crucial factor in the story of Adam and Eve, simply because they are unconscious of it as a problem until the moment before they remedy it. Milton was able to proclaim, "Nor those mysterious parts were then conceal'd, / Then was not guilty shame" (4.312-13) and describe his Adam and Eve as happily
oblivious to their unclothed state: "So passed they naked on, nor shunn'd the sight / Of God or Angel, for they thought no ill" (4.319-20). But Lamb himself admits that Othello's color is critical to the whole conception of his courtship and marriage to Desdemona. They, and we as either readers or audience, are forced to consider it as it is brought up throughout the play.

By allowing the reader to avoid the face of an actual Othello, Lamb unintentionally opens the door to such reader responses as that of Mary Preston in her *Studies in Shakespeare* of 1869:

In studying the play of *Othello*, I have always imagined its hero a white man. It is true the dramatist paints him black, but this shade does not suit the man. It is a stage decoration, which my taste discards; a fault of colour from an artistic point of view. I have, therefore, as I before stated in my readings of this play, dispensed with it. Shakespeare was too correct a delineator of human nature to have coloured Othello black, if he had personally acquainted himself with the idiosyncrasies of the African race. (qtd. in Furness 395)

She goes on to maintain that "the daub of black upon Othello's portrait" is "a freak of nature" and "one of the
few erroneous strokes of the great master's brush, the single blemish on a faultless work." She closes by announcing that "Othello was a white man!" (qtd. in Furness 395)

While Preston's reading of the play is certainly at odds with Lamb's, it is no doubt as "soothing" and "flattering" to her sensibilities (writing from Maryland four years after the close of the Civil War) as Lamb's reading is to his. Preston could believe that, like Lamb, and like Desdemona herself, she was merely exercising her prerogative to see Othello's color in his mind and ignore—or recreate—the potentially distasteful color of his skin.

Lamb and Preston at least agree that Shakespeare himself intended Othello to be a black man. Lamb makes it clear that Shakespeare saw his general, anachronistically, as a "coal-black Moor":

For such he is represented, in the imperfect state of knowledge respecting foreign countries in those days, compared with our own, or in compliance with popular notions, though the Moors are now well enough known to be by many shades less unworthy of a white woman's fancy. (1: 125)

It is unfortunate that Lamb holds there are degrees of worthiness based on gradations of skin color, but he is
correct in pointing out that the actual Moors, from Mauritania in northern Africa, though dark, are not truly negroid. As Lamb knows, Shakespeare's making Othello a Moor is not in itself conclusive evidence as to the skin color the author envisioned. Lamb was well aware that Shakespeare did not always achieve strict accuracy in all details. Samuel Johnson had already put the case bluntly in the Preface to his 1765 edition of the plays, saying of Shakespeare, 'He had no regard to distinction of time or place, but gives to one age or nation, without scruple, the customs, institutions, and opinions of another at the expense not only of likelihood but of possibility' (100). To this mingling of customs and institutions may be added historical and geographic discrepancies. An author who could put striking clocks in ancient Rome and seacoasts in Bohemia would not necessarily be precise in designating the color of an exotic north African.

Accepting that Othello's Moorish background is inconclusive so far as his color goes, there has still been dispute even about what might seem to be the very clear indications of color in the text. And even here there is certainly room for ambiguity, for the word "black" itself, in the Elizabethan era, could mean no more than brunette, as in Shakespeare's "Dark Lady" sonnets. Coleridge was among the first to use the text itself as an argument against
Othello's blackness. He maintains that Roderigo's description of the general as a "thick-lips" is "the one if not the only justification of the blackamoor Othello" (1: 42). Coleridge dismisses the insult as a reflection of Roderigo's jealousy toward Othello and not as an accurate description. Later in the century, Joseph Hunter argued that "the expression 'black' is to be interpreted as meaning no more than very dark, and this in comparison with the fair European" (281). However, Horace Howard Furness drew attention to the third act, where the jealous Othello says of Desdemona, "Her name that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.386-88). For Furness, the testimony Othello gives about himself settles the argument in favor of a black Othello (395-96). Early in our own century, A. C. Bradley felt it "nearly certain" that Shakespeare "imagined Othello as a black man, and not as a light brown one" (166), pointing out the many indications that Shakespeare's other Moor, Aaron in the early Titus Andronicus, is black (167). Although many others have lent their opinions to the controversy, it is probably safe to say, with Lamb, that Shakespeare intended a black Othello.

The greatest difficulty with accepting a black Othello is his marriage to the white Desdemona. Giraldi Cinthio, whose tale in his Hecatommithi was the source for
Shakespeare's play, clearly identifies Othello as a Negro, and seems to use the tale as an opportunity to draw a moral about the dangers of interracial marriage. At the point of her greatest confusion and despair, his Desdemona reflects on the reason for her travail:

I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents' wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us. (Bullough 248)

There is little or nothing in Shakespeare's play which invites us to take such a reductive view. Although the characters who oppose the marriage--Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio--raise Othello's color as an objection, and even the basically sympathetic Emilia comes to see the union as a "filthy bargain" (5.2.158), the nobility of Othello and Desdemona's love for one another prior to Iago's interference, its ability to transcend racial prejudices, is surely intended to win approval from reader and audience alike.

Nevertheless, by Lamb's era the idea of a black man marrying a white woman could provoke a strongly negative response. Again it was Coleridge who led the attack on such a conception:
No doubt Desdemona saw Othello's visage in his mind; yet, as we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable Negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated. (1: 42)

It is fortunate, though not necessarily for Coleridge, that A. C. Bradley was able to give this line of reasoning its death blow:

Could any argument be more self-destructive? It actually did appear to Brabantio "something monstrous to conceive" his daughter falling in love with Othello--so monstrous that he could account for her love only by drugs and foul charms. And the suggestion that such love would argue "disproportionateness" is precisely the suggestion that Iago did make in Desdemona's case. (168)

Bradley makes it clear that to chafe against the mixed marriage of Othello and Desdemona is to ally ourselves with Iago and the other characters bent on destroying their love.
Nevertheless, Bradley, who revered Lamb, goes on to say, "I will not discuss the further question whether, granted that to Shakespeare Othello was black, he should be represented as a black in our theatres now. I dare say not" (169). Referring specifically to Lamb's essay, Bradley maintains that seeing the coal-black Othello in the flesh is a very different thing from reading about him:

The aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would overpower our imagination and sink us below not Shakespeare only but the audiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (169)

While Bradley is able to point out the self-defeating errors in Coleridge's reading of the play, his own reasoning against a black stage Othello suffers from the glaring inconsistency which also lies, though not so obviously, at the heart of Lamb's argument. For Bradley fails to explain how he can call such racism an "aversion of the blood" bordering on the "merely physical," while in the same breath admitting that audiences of earlier centuries were not subject to it.

The theatre history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries suggests that audiences then were in fact quite willing to tolerate a black Othello; Lamb's claim that "every one that has seen Othello played" has shared his
revulsion is simply untrue. Down to Edmund Kean's time, Othello was always represented as black (Hawkins 1: 221). Kean was the first to present Othello as a light brown figure, and it is worth noting the reason for the change given by his biographer, Hawkins: "In his performance of Othello, Kean got rid of the difficulty arising from the supposed necessity of blackening the Moor's face, by which much of the play of the countenance on the stage was lost" (1: 221). It appears that Kean's desire to represent Othello as a brown-skinned man stemmed not from a concern about the audience's inability to tolerate a black one, but from the purely practical difficulty of reading the expression of a face blackened by the makeup of the day. In his Lives of the Players of 1831, John Galt speculated on David Garrick's earlier failure in the role, concluding that "the probability, therefore, is that he failed in the expression of the countenance alone, and that this default and short-coming to expectation was entirely owing to the black disguise he was obliged to assume" (qtd. in Furness 389). An anonymous critic for the Dramatic Censor of 1770 wrote on the difficulties of Quin, an Othello of the first half of the eighteenth century, who also struggled with black makeup: "I remember once to see this esteemed performer play the Moor in a large powdered wig, which, with the black face, made such a magpie appearance of his head,
as tended greatly to laughter" (qtd. in Furness 389). The derisive laughter provoked here at least seems more benign than the revulsion anticipated by Lamb.

The simple truth is that, during the two hundred years prior to Lamb's essay, audiences saw and accepted a black Othello; had they been revolted by the sight of a black man and a white woman in love, the play would surely not have flourished in the dramatic repertory as it did. And while there is no doubt that racial prejudice is still with us, our society on the whole has at least come to the point where it can view the love of a black Othello and a white Desdemona on stage with no more qualms than the audiences of Shakespeare's day.

But aside from the racial issue, Lamb brings up a more general argument: that there are characters or images which are "improper to be shewn to our bodily eye" which may yet be read about with propriety, or even described in the theatre. Such an argument is hardly new, since it is essentially that held by the ancient Greek theatre, which was not averse to describing the blinding of Oedipus in graphic detail, but would not allow the act to be represented in even the most abstract manner on stage. Such a careful discretion, however, is far from the spirit of Shakespeare, who was not hesitant, in an early potboiler like Titus Andronicus, to confront his audience with the
sight of a ravished young maiden, whose hands and tongue have been cut off, carrying the stump of her father's severed hand between her teeth. As Coleridge points out, Shakespeare had learned that "nothing could be made too marked for the nerves of his audience" (1: 42). Even in his mature tragedies, Shakespeare does not shrink from the final carnage of Hamlet or the onstage blinding of Gloucester in King Lear. It is not surprising that an audience which not only tolerated but enjoyed such spectacles also apparently had no trouble stomaching a racially mixed marriage.

The question of whether to present "something extremely revolting" to an audience's senses or leave it to the imagination still has relevance today. Even if the controversy over a black Othello has been put largely to rest, it may be that there are still characters which, as Lamb would argue, "from some circumstance, some adjunct to their character, are improper to be shewn to our bodily eye." In order to examine this claim, it becomes necessary to find a modern analogy to the racial revulsion of Lamb's day, some characteristic which it is still difficult for an audience to accept in the flesh. If race is no longer such a volatile issue, there may still be some trait, such as extreme physical deformity, which a modern audience might still have trouble viewing. With this in mind, it may be worthwhile to contrast the recent stage and film productions
of *The Elephant Man*, the story of such an unfortunate character, and examine the differing strategies these works adopt to deal with this delicate issue. It should be emphasized that, in selecting this analogy, there is no intention of equating physical deformity with membership in a racial minority, but only an attempt to find an admittedly extreme type of character for whom "the actual sight of the thing" might bring at least some modern audience members the same kind of revulsion Lamb felt at seeing a black Othello.

The stage and film versions of *The Elephant Man*, independent of one another, both appearing within the space of a year, tell the story of John Merrick, the hideously deformed victim of neurofibromatosis who was discovered in a sideshow by the physician Frederick Treves, brought to London Hospital, Whitechapel, and for the last four years of his life, from 1886-1890, became a celebrity visited by the high society of the day. The play, written by Bernard Pomerance, chooses to convey Merrick's deformity by suggestion. Philip Anglim, the actor who played the role, in what one critic hailed as "a marvelous extension of the collusion which allows a performer to become a character" (Weales 181), merely suggested the deformity of Merrick by elaborate muscular contortions. Critics praised the performance, saying that Anglim "eloquently distorts his body to portray the anguish of a sensitive spirit trapped in
twisted flesh" (Kroll 67), creating a figure of beauty "like some sort of simple, twisted saint" (Kalem 64). This mere suggestion of deformity gave the audience room to use their imaginations: "the audience can at once perceive the man and the freak" (Weales 181). One critic summed up the intention of the production in words that would apply equally to the view of Othello Lamb obtained in reading: "it is safe to say that Anglim presents a portrayal of his character's soul rather than his body" (Richardson 63). But at least one critic felt the device to be something of a cheat: "Instead of rattling us, it soothes us, lulls us into a sense of moral superiority" (Bayles 67). Leaving the unpleasant physical reality to the audience's imagination has the "soothing" effect Lamb felt in reading Othello--the critic uses Lamb's very word--but the moral implications of keeping such a safe distance are questionable.

In the film directed by David Lynch, on the other hand, John Hurt's features were entirely obscured by an elaborate makeup job which copied the actual features of Merrick with exacting verisimilitude. This prompted at least one critic to complain, in terms much like Lamb's argument about the senses overpowering the imagination in the theatre, that "we're no longer required, as we were at the play, to imagine the extremity of Merrick's condition, thereby projecting ourselves emotionally into the material" (Denby
Surprisingly, though, many critics found themselves becoming strongly drawn to the character, by a process reminiscent of Desdemona's being able "To fall in love with what she feared to look on" (1.3.98). As one critic put it, "The effect is curious: after the suspenseful buildup and the initial shock, our eyes adjust to the monstrously deformed Merrick and begin to see the humanity underneath" (Kroll 71). Another echoed the same sentiment: "Once you adjust to his makeup, Hurt glows in the dark with nobility" (Hoberman 52). Yet a third confirmed this effect: "We don't see merely the deformities, we see the helpless person locked in the repulsive flesh" (Kael 178). After awhile, even Merrick's appearance begins to take on a different aspect in the audience's eyes:

He's a large lumplike mass at first, but as we get to know him, and respond to his helplessness, he begins to seem very slight--almost doll-like. There's nothing frightening about him, and he's not repellent, either. His misshapen body and the knobby protuberances on his forehead suggest a work of art. (Kael 178)

Ultimately the audience is won over by the character: "Hurt inhabits this sweet-souled ogre with the Elephant Man's own grace and spirit" (Corliss 94). Here, it seems, is an occasion where the audience has truly seen through the
"revolting" physical appearance to the mind and soul underneath. And it is this process which is analogous to Desdemona's experience, for although Lamb maintains that "in reading the play, we see with Desdemona's eyes" (1: 126), in fact neither the reader nor the audience member who is presented with only a suggestion of the physical reality has had Desdemona's experience. For although Desdemona saw Othello's color in his mind, it could only have been by first confronting "what she feared to look on" and overcoming the barrier of initial prejudice. Only if we can do the same as audience members do we have the right to equate our experience with hers. The film version of The Elephant Man would seem to show that, not only is such a transcendence of Bradley's "aversion of the blood" possible, but it is potentially an enlightening, rewarding experience.

But as pointed out above, there are pitfalls in any analogy, and it is only fair to mention at least some of the difficulties at work in this one. The truth may be that accepting the deformed Merrick of the film may not be all that difficult or praiseworthy a feat. Modern audiences have become inured to grotesque film makeup and effects: "the lumpy twisted head soon becomes just one more horror-flick getup" (Kauffmann 40). The audience is always fully aware that they are seeing a fiction: "good as the make-up is, incidentally, it still looks like make-up"
(Simon 50). Even the cinematography serves to mitigate the full effect: "the black-and-white photography turns Merrick's massive deformities into contrasting hollows and mounds that have little of the tactile horror of tormented flesh" (Denby 81). Thus the photography "puts the audience at a discreet remove from Merrick's deformity" (Corliss 94).

While thus protecting the audience from fully confronting the horror of the real Merrick's deformities, the film manages to instill in its viewers that same "soothing," "flattering" feeling Lamb found so rewarding. "The film congratulates itself at every turn, not forgetting to congratulate its audience as well" (Hoberman 52). "The movie allows us to congratulate ourselves for exercising the humane sympathies that in fact many of us do not have" (Denby 81). "The audience is left with a warm, self-satisfied feeling that people are awfully kind" (Hatch 388). Such criticisms indicate that we can be just as dubiously "soothed" and "flattered" even when confronted with a close approximation of the harsh reality.

Part of the explanation for this seeming paradox is that the film audience was never confronted with "the actual sight of the thing" at all, but only with what they knew to be no more than a skillful makeup job. No less than in the stage production, then, the film audience was called upon to use its imagination in order to believe in the central
character's deformity. And this is the case with Othello as well, for despite Lamb's claim, no audience up to his time had ever confronted the "actual sight of the thing": they had never seen a "black" Othello who was not in fact a white actor darkened by what was almost certainly a rather crude makeup. London did not encounter a truly black Othello until the late nineteenth century with the arrival of the American actor Ira Aldridge (Wine 46). And even then, what the audience saw on stage was still at a discreet remove from reality, for although Aldridge created something of a stir by his actually being married to a white woman (Wine 46), an audience member would certainly be aware that he was neither married to his stage Desdemona nor consummating a fictive union with her between scenes.

Lamb loses sight of the fact that the theatre is never the home of actuality, even in its most realistic modes. The Greeks did not allow violence on stage, but even the Elizabethans, who did, only provided such "violence" as feigned deaths, fake blood, and artificial limbs could suggest. The spectator knew this, just as even the most racist audience member of Lamb's day knew that the "coal-black" Othello he witnessed on stage was neither a real Negro nor actually engaged in intimate relations with the white woman supposedly married to him. Only one thing could have made such transparently false attempts at realism
so "extremely revolting" to Lamb: that faculty which Coleridge described as the "temporary half-faith" demanded by the stage (I: 178), and to which he elsewhere gave the better-known term the "willing suspension of disbelief." In other words, although Lamb assumes that the visible, stage Othello is offensive because the theatre is the realm where "the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty," it was, paradoxically, Lamb's own imagination which caused him to react so strongly to the sight of a man in makeup. For although the stage may provide more actuality than the printed page, it is nonetheless still at a great remove from the actuality of life itself. This was recognized in 1850 by John Wilson, who, writing for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, discussed the issue of Othello's color. Clearly affected by the racial prejudices of his day, he nevertheless opts for a black Othello, keeping in mind "the removal which the Stage makes of a subject from reality" (484):

In life you cannot bear that the White Woman shall marry the Black Man. . . . Your senses would revolt with loathing. But on the stage some consciousness that everything is not as literally meant as it seems,—that symbols of humanity, and not actual men and women, are before you,—saves the Play. (484)
Ultimately, then, so far as the on-stage union of Othello and Desdemona is concerned, "the gap which is between the Stage and Reality must prevent, in our hearts, anything like loathing of the conjunction" (485).

It is this consciousness of the "gap" between the stage and reality which Lamb seems to lack at the moments he is so revolted by a black Othello. And the very fact that he shows such revulsion proves that the stage portrayal stimulated in him that imaginative faculty which, he argues, is lost in the theatre.
CHAPTER IV

"WHAT GESTURE SHALL WE APPROPRIATE TO THIS?":

KING LEAR

In his discussion of *King Lear*, Lamb advances his strongest attack on the theatre. His arguments here have such wide-ranging implications that any examination of them must look beyond the context of this one Shakespearean tragedy and consider an array of theatrical traditions. For in his comments on *Lear*, Lamb will challenge the very nature of dramatic representation and seek to expose its inherent limitations.

At first, Lamb's objections to a theatrical portrayal of Lear are similar to his argument against *Othello* on stage: some aspects of the performance are unpleasant to watch.

So to see Lear acted,—to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting. We want to take him into shelter and relieve him. That is all the feeling which the acting of Lear ever produced in me. (1: 124)
As suggested in the preceding chapter, it is that same imaginative faculty which Lamb values so highly, and which he claims is absent from the theatre, which allows him to become so distressed at what he knows is no more than an actor playing a role. But there is a difference, for while Lamb's revulsion at a black Othello surely went against Shakespeare's intention, his desire to "shelter and relieve" Lear appears to be exactly what the author called for. Shakespeare must have wanted his audience to experience such impulses--he continually guides their response in this direction by having most of the sympathetic characters in the drama express exactly these feelings. The Fool, accompanying Lear on the heath, cries out in concern, "Good nuncle, in; ask they daughter's blessing. Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools" (3.2.11-13). Once Kent has joined the group, he urges Lear into a hovel for protection from the elements, crying "Good my lord, enter. / The tyranny of the open night's too rough / For nature to endure" (3.4.1-3), and assuring the suspicious king that he would rather break his own heart than his master's. Gloucester, safe indoors, impatiently tells his son, "If I die for it, as no less is threatened me, the King my old master must be relieved" (3.3.15-17). Finding the King, and telling him that he refuses to "let this tyrannous night take hold upon you," he proclaims that "I have ventured to
come seek you out / And bring you where both fire and food
is ready" (3.4.142-44). And finally, Cordelia, looking on
the face of her unconscious and storm-battered father, cries
out, "Mine enemy's dog, / Though he had bit me, should have
stood that night / Against my fire" (4.7.36-38). The way in
which so many characters rally around Lear in his anguish is
one of the most poignant aspects of the play. It is hard to
see anything inappropriate in the feelings Lamb experienced
while watching a performance of Lear, especially when those
exact feelings are voiced, in the very same words, by so
many of the play's characters. That Lamb finds such
feelings "painful and disgusting" is another matter, but if
he did not experience a similar desire to "shelter and
relieve" Lear in his private readings of the play, one must
wonder whether he was responding fully to the cues in
Shakespeare's text.

Lamb goes on to argue against the possibility of an
adequate representation of Lear; for Lamb, Lear is the only
character who is simply impossible to represent on stage:

But the Lear of Shakspeare cannot be acted. The
contemptible machinery by which they mimic the
storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate
to represent the horrors of the real elements,
than any actor can be to represent Lear. (1: 124)
Hazlitt would later support Lamb's view of the impossibility of the part: "There are pieces of ancient granite that turn the edge of any modern chisel, so perhaps the genius of no living actor can be expected to cope with Lear" (193). Lamb himself says that "they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon the stage, or one of Michael Angelo’s terrible figures" (1: 124). The comparison of Lear with the most stupendous works of art in other media is not peculiar to Lamb. Coleridge had made a similar analogy, arguing that when conceived as a visual image the play is "more terrific than any a Michael Angelo inspired by a Dante could have executed" (1: 59), while early in this century A. C. Bradley, acknowledging the influence of Lamb's essay, said that when he considered the greatness of Lear he put it on a plane "with works like the Prometheus Vinctus and the Divine Comedy, and even with the greatest symphonies of Beethoven and the statues in the Medici Chapel" (201). Lear, among all of Shakespeare's plays, inspires critics with the notion that the work transcends the theatre--as Bradley flatly states, "King Lear is too huge for the stage" (203).

As he elaborates on the actor's inability to encompass Lear, Lamb reaches the central point of his argument:

The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of
his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are the storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. (1: 124)

Hazlitt, writing some nine years later when reviewing Edmund Kean's 1820 performance of the role, may well have been echoing Lamb's imagery when he maintained that the passion of Lear is "like a sea, swelling, chafing, raging, without bound, without hope, without beacon or anchor" (192). For Lamb, this tumultuous internal activity within Lear finds no adequate reflection in his external circumstances. In comparison, the physical reality is of negligible importance: "This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on; even as he himself neglects it" (1: 124). Here Lamb is guilty of an oversimplification which does not stand up to a close examination of Shakespeare's text. Lamb is referring to the passage where Lear, in the midst of the storm, says, "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else / Save what beats there" (3.4.12-14), indicating, indeed, that his mental torment prevents him from feeling the physical. But it should be noted that a few lines later Lear says of the storm, "This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things would hurt me more" (3.4.24-25), implying the exact opposite, that the storm mercifully
prevents him from feeling the torment of his mind. In Lear's distraught state, of course, he need not be held to any merely logical consistency. Lamb himself points out this characteristic of Lear: "In the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning" (1: 124). But that very irregular reasoning should prevent us from oversimplifying Lear's state of mind, as Lamb does when he maintains that Lear's external world is "too insignificant to be thought on." Lear's own words repeatedly give the lie to this argument—he is intensely aware of the storm. It becomes inextricably linked with his internal state, the two alternately reflecting and relieving one another. A few lines further into this scene he cries out, "In such a night / To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure. / In such a night as this!" (3.4.17-19). And before finally accepting shelter, he kneels in prayer for those "poor naked wretches, whersoe'er you are / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.28), at the same time recognizing that the best antidote to his own pride is to expose himself "to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.34). In fact, the storm itself becomes one of the crucial agents in that painful yet necessary process which forces Lear to confront his own humanity. This process begins in the first storm scene, when Lear starts to look beyond his own concerns to care for the shivering Fool cowering next to
him, seeing there a reflection of his own too-human limitations. He asks, "How dost, my boy? Art cold? / I am cold myself" (3.2.68-69), and begins to realize that the most simple physical necessities, like shelter from the storm, can have a transcendent value:

Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
And can make vile things precious. (3.2.69-71)

The storm teaches Lear the value of the most insignificant material comfort, even as it confronts him with the vanity of the pomp he had known. Lear shows this final realization in his later madness, thinking back on what he learned from the storm:

When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie—I am not ague-proof. (4.6.100-104)

Despite all this evidence to the contrary, Lamb maintains that Lear "neglects" the storm. In fact, it is Lamb, perhaps disgusted by the stagecraft of his day and "the contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm" (1: 124), who neglects not only the physical tempest but, as in Macbeth, all the external dramatic situation surrounding
the central character. According to Lamb, when we read Lear, "we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms" (1: 124). It is demonstrably false that Lear's mind is able to "baffle" the pain and betrayal he feels at the hands of his daughters—as false as the idea that he "neglects" the storm. Even in the furthest reaches of his madness the image of his daughters' ingratitude sears at his heart.

Nevertheless, even if Lamb is too quick to overlook the physical environment and dramatic circumstances surrounding a character, he still raises a vital issue, the representation of the human mind on stage. For if in the reading it is true of Lear that "it is his mind which is laid bare" (1: 124), how can the stage hope to reveal this inner activity? Lamb will say, somewhat later in his essay, "What we see upon a stage is body and bodily action; what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind, and its movements" (1: 126). Of the tempest in Lear's mind, Lamb asks bluntly, "What gesture shall we appropriate to this? What has the voice or the eye to do with such things?" (1: 124)

Certainly the representation of the human mind on stage remains a problem in the contemporary theatre. Arthur Miller, in attempting to create a modern-day tragic drama, originally half-seriously conceived of a play to be called
The Inside of His Head, in which an enormous face, filling the proscenium arch, would appear and then open up, giving in effect a literal view of the workings of the protagonist's mind. Miller eventually wrote his *Death of a Salesman* without relying on the unwieldy device, creating a successful play without necessarily solving the essential problem. In Lamb's view, there is no solution: the stage is simply unable to encompass the power and complexity of the human mind. Nevertheless, a challenge to Lamb's view can be advanced, based partly on the principles of semiotics, the study of signs.

Theatre, of course, is a multi-faceted art form, an amalgam of several diverse media. Tadeusz Kowzan, in his essay "The Sign in the Theater," has classified some thirteen distinct theatrical sign systems, including language, tone, facial expression, gesture, movement, costume, props, etc. (61). Lamb concerns himself chiefly with the actor's vocal tone, facial expression, and gesture. Discussion here will be limited to theatrical gesture, and the expressive capabilities of the "gesticulating actor" Lamb so readily dismisses.

Lamb's objections become more understandable after examining some of the treatises on theatrical gestures current in his day, works which reveal some of the presuppositions on which the early nineteenth-century
theatre was based. Henry Siddons, the son of Sarah Siddons, was thoroughly familiar with the London stage of the period. In 1822 he published his *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, based on the German work by Johann Jacob Engel but "adapted to the English Drama."

Siddon's treatise features sixty-nine engravings illustrating conventionalized individual gestures or attitudes, along with the specific passion each is held to represent. While aware that his catalog is rudimentary, Siddons is confident that such a codification of gestures and their meanings will yield lasting and valuable results:

> Why would not a collection of expressive gestures and attitudes be as easy as a collection of drawings, plants, or shells? And if this affair should one day become an object of serious study, why should not technical words be in time found out, as proper for this science as those at present discovered for the facilitation of the study of natural history? (25)

A different but complementary approach, based on the same basic premises, had earlier been taken by the Reverend Gilbert Austin in his *Chironomia; or a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*, published in 1806. Rather than defining the passions associated with particular gestures,
Austin attempts a classification of the possible kinds of significant gesture, the development of a notational system capable of recording them, and the combination of such a system with dramatic text to produce an actor's score providing direction for both words and gestures. Like Siddons, Austin displays boundless confidence in formulating his goal:

To produce a language of symbols so simple and so perfect as to render it possible with facility to represent every action of an orator throughout his speech, or of an actor throughout the whole drama.

(274)

From a modern, post-Stanislavski point of view, both works may seem almost comically inadequate or misguided, focusing as they do on the externals of physical representation and saying comparatively little about the inner, psychological techniques which allow the actor to explore the motivations of a character. The actor with nothing other than such works to guide him might indeed find his performance reduced to a limited range of stock dramatic gestures.

But although Lamb's objections to the staging of Shakespeare were fueled by his reaction to the early nineteenth-century theatre, and appear especially valid when brought to bear on that tradition, his arguments touch
ultimately upon the very nature of performance. Thus an attempt to answer Lamb's criticism of the theatre in general and the expressive limitations of the "gesticulating actor" in particular must wrestle with the problem of the very nature of the signification of gesture in the theatre. The concepts and terminology of semiotics, defined by Ferdinand de Saussure as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (16), provide a useful tool in such an analysis. It will be necessary to define some of the terms of this still young discipline, especially since, given the particular nature of the topic under discussion, some of these terms will be used in a somewhat different sense than is common.

Saussure's division of the process of signification into three components will be observed here: the "signifier" is the material image which represents a concept, called the "signified," and the union of the two in the mind of the interpreter is the "sign" (65-67). However, heed should be given to Roland Barthes' warning that in common parlance "there is a tendency to interpret sign as signifier" (Elements 39). The word "sign" will appear frequently in what follows, employed by several writers from various disciplines, and in most of these cases it will be apparent that the word is in fact used primarily to refer to the material signifier.
C. S. Peirce, like Saussure one of the founders of modern semiotics, distinguished between three main classes of signs. In *Social Semiotics*, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress aptly summarize these three major types: an "icon" is based on identity or likeness, an "index" on contiguity or causality, and a "symbol" on arbitrary convention (21-22). However, for the study of theatrical gesture, a reinterpretation of the relationship between these three types of signs proves necessary. Peirce saw a regular progression of icon, index, and symbol, with index as a sort of mean between the two extremes represented by icon and symbol (299). Hodge and Kress express this progression as a continuum from the most "motivated" (icon) to the most "arbitrary" (symbol). They concede that the terms "arbitrary" and "motivated" are themselves problematic, but seem to equate motivation with the "transparency" of a signifier--that is, the ease with which its relation to the signified can be perceived (22). This continuum of icon-index-symbol, therefore, appears to be based on a notion of "motivation" as conceptual and involving the interpretation of an already existing signifier by a decoder.

An examination of gesture, however, theatrical or otherwise, cannot be divorced from the psychology of human behavior. A gesture must be considered not only in relation
to a concept that might be gleaned from it by an observer, but also in relation to the inner state of the human being executing it. Thus, "motivation" will be used here in the sense commonly given it in theatrical parlance, as that which impels action; the word will carry its psychological connotation and will involve the creation of the signifying gesture by the performer.

From this perspective, the progression of signs from most to least motivated is reordered and becomes index-icon-symbol. An index is most "motivated" in this psychological sense in that, as Peirce defines the term, the relation is one of cause and effect: "An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object" (248). (Peirce appears to use "sign" where Saussure would use "signifier" and "object" where Saussure would use "signified"--see Peirce 228). In theatrical performance, such a gesture, however preplanned in rehearsal, would arise in virtually spontaneous response to the actor's emotional involvement in the imaginative circumstances of the play. Thus gesture as index betokens an especially intimate relationship between signifier and signified: "an index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair" (Peirce 299). Furthermore, the gesture ceases to be an index if appropriated and mechanically reproduced by another actor.
who lacks such internal involvement: "an index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed" (Peirce 304).

An iconic gesture, on the other hand, is not dependent on any particular inner state of the actor. As Peirce maintains, "the Icon has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness" (299). An icon works by "analogy," in that sense of the word as "resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1974 ed.). An iconic gesture may resemble motivated human behavior, but need not arise out of any corresponding psychological state within the actor at the moment of performance: "an icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence" (Peirce 304).

Iconic gestures must be further subdivided into two classes, which may be called "representational" and "presentational," according to whether or not the resemblance is to actual human behavior. Perhaps this distinction can be clarified by the example of a mime and the ways he uses his hands to create a wall and a bird. He creates the wall by pressing his flattened palms against an
imaginary plane; his hands resemble, not the wall, but the hands of a man encountering a wall. The gesture is "representational" in that the mime behaves as he might were he himself actually within such circumstances. He creates the bird, on the other hand, by crossing and fluttering his hands to create the likeness of a bird. The gesture is "presentational" in that the mime is no longer positioning himself as a character within imaginary circumstances, but addressing the audience directly as an illustrator.

This second, "presentational," type of iconic gesture borders on the symbolic gesture, which is also removed from the norms of human behavior and does not even resemble its signified, but merely stands for it by convention: "the symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (Peirce 299). This would include certain types of sign languages in which each different hand gesture represents a letter of the alphabet.

This triadic division among types of gestures is not as rigid as might be inferred from the above, and a single gesture may partake of more than one of these classifications. Nevertheless, the distinction will prove useful in what follows.

It will be observed that the types of gestures codified by Siddons, notated by Austin, and presumably railed against
by Lamb fall into the category of representational icons: they resemble at least some instances of human behavior, and can be learned and utilized by the actor without the cultivation of any corresponding internal state. An explanation of why such gestures seem so inadequate appears to be offered by Roland Barthes in his essay "The Romans in Films" from his early collection *Mythologies*. Like Lamb, Barthes addresses the issue of Shakespearean tragedy in performance, though in terms of the twentieth-century medium of film. Although he does not consider gesture, he does look at such representational icons as false sweat applied to the actor to signify an inner turmoil, which, like the gestures advocated by Henry Siddons, "remains on the surface, yet does not for all that give up the attempt to pass itself off as depth" (*Mythologies* 28). In considering this kind of "cheating," Barthes forms "an ethic of signs":

> Signs ought to present themselves only in two extreme forms: either openly intellectual and so remote that they are reduced to an algebra, as in the Chinese theatre, where a flag on its own signifies a regiment; or deeply rooted, invented so to speak, on each occasion, revealing an internal, a hidden facet, and indicative of a moment in time, no longer of a concept (as in the art of Stanislavski, for instance). (28)
In condemning the sweating Romans, Barthes objects to what he terms the "intermediate sign," which falls between "the intellectual and the visceral sign," and which "presents itself at once as intentional and irrepressible, artificial and natural, manufactured and discovered" and is "equally afraid of simple reality and of total artifice" (28). Thus, at least in theatrical/cinematic representation, Barthes advocates the observance of a strict dichotomy of two "extreme forms," which can be diagrammed as follows:

| "intellectual" | "visceral" |
| "intentional" | "irrepressible" |
| "artificial" | "natural" |
| "manufactured" | "discovered" |
| "remote" | "internal" |
| "concept" | "moment in time" |
| "total artifice" | "simple reality" |

This dichotomy corresponds to the reordered progression of index-icon-symbol presented above (which may be reversed to symbol-icon-index to reflect the order in which Barthes presents the dichotomy). Although Barthes does not employ Peirce's triadic division of signs, the "conceptual," "artifical," "manufactured" side of his dichotomy appears to
be symbolic (as does the Chinese theatrical flag he gives in example) or at most iconic in the "presentational" sense. On the other hand, the opposing "internal," "visceral," "irrepressible" "simple reality" seems clearly indexical (as does the psychologically "motivated" art of Stanislavski Barthes cites as an example). Both types of signs are acceptable in Barthes' scheme, while the representational icon, the "intermediate sign," is rejected for its "duplicity" (28). It is this type of gestural sign, at once superficially imposed and attempting to pass as deeply motivated, which Lamb sees as the actor's only stock in trade. He rails against "those low tricks upon the eye and ear" which, he maintains, an actor can master simply by "observing a few general effects, which some common passion, as grief, anger, &c. usually has upon the gestures and exterior" (1: 113). In Lamb's view, such gestures are no more than "a copy of the usual external effects of such passions," or perhaps no more than "that symbol of the emotion which passes current at the theatre for it" (1: 119), a matter of convention and changing fashion. Lamb raises the question of how such a limited gestural vocabulary can express the complexities of the human consciousness.

Lamb was only aware of one type of theatrical gesture, what has been labeled here the "representational icon," a
type which Barthes' argument would dismiss entirely. But perhaps in setting up a such a strict dichotomy of acceptable signs, Barthes himself will ultimately bear the same censure as Lear: "thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle" (1.4.177-78). Before accepting Lamb's dismissal or Barthes' restrictive scheme, it would be worthwhile to examine the merits and disadvantages of each type of gestural sign as it has been employed in the theatres of various countries and eras.

The use of symbolic gestures is relatively rare in Western theatrical traditions, but there is a decided advantage to this most artificial of signs. Symbolic gesture shares with other symbolic sign systems, such as language, a tremendous economy of expression, which Barthes attributes to the "double articulation" principle: with a minimum of distinctive units (such as the 21 letters in the American Spanish alphabet), a tremendous number of significant units can be built up (a vocabulary of 100,000 words) (Elements 39). Some Oriental theatrical traditions, such as the Chinese mentioned above by Barthes, rely heavily on symbolism, and some of these extend this development of symbolic language to gestures. The Indian Kathakali dance theatre features a gesture code which can "approach the facility of spoken language" (Kirby 40), including a vocabulary of some 800 signs made with both hands (Kowzan
Such an elaborate vocabulary of symbolic gesture does not truly approach the comprehensiveness of spoken language, however, and therefore many of the Kathakali gestures must assume a radically polysemous character. The pataka, or flat hand, for instance, may signify "clouds, a forest, things, bosom, might, peace, a river, heaven, prowess, moonlight, strong, sunlight, wave, entering, silence, an oath, the sea, sword, a palmyra leaf" (Ikegami 373). It is also questionable to what extent the gestures are truly symbolic. While "there are quite a number of hand gestures that cannot be readily associated with what they refer to," many of them fall into either the "presentational" icon category (the pataka or flat hand placed over the head, palm upwards, to signify clouds) or, in some instances, the "representational" icon (the simha-mukha hand, with thumb in contact with curled middle and ring fingers, held before the nose to indicate holding something to smell) (Ikegami 388). It appears that even these Eastern traditions do not rely on symbolic gesture alone, and that a theatrical vocabulary based wholly on such a sign system would have limited use.

The more realistic Western traditions have tended, until relatively recently, to formulate theories of theatrical gesture based on the representational icon. Such theories originate in the rhetorical training of classical antiquity, and were highly developed in the theatre of
Shakespeare's day. John Bulwer's Chirologia and Chironomia, both published in 1644, feature an elaborate codification of hand gestures. However foreign some of these gestures may seem to our own day, they differ from those of the Indian Kathakali theatre since, as Bulwer insists, they resemble "the natural and familiar motion of . . . the hand" (qtd. in Joseph 6). By Lamb's era such esoteric hand gestures have given way to the more easily recognizable representational icons of Henry Siddons. Siddons himself maintains that theatrical gestures should resemble actual human behavior and that the actor is first and foremost an observer of life:

The player who wishes to be accomplished in his art should not only study the passions on their broad and general basis; he should trace their operations in all their shades, in all their different varieties, as they act upon different conditions and as they operate in various climates. (10)

This close observation of behavior was employed by actors faced with the mad scenes in King Lear. In the eighteenth century, David Garrick prepared for these scenes by studying the actions of a man who had gone insane after dropping his child to its death (Rosenberg 209). In Lamb's own era, Edmund Kean took a similar approach to the role:
The real insanity and decrepitude of that old monarch of four score and upward is a most arduous part. I often visited St. Luke's and Bethlehem Hospitals in order to comprehend the manifestation of real insanity ere I appeared in Lear. (Hawkins 2: 169)

But Lamb argues that, at least in the case of Shakespeare, the dramatist did not draw his characters from an "admirable observation of life," but rather "from his own mind" (1: 119). In Lamb's view, no gesture can be an adequate representation of these mental activities. In the treatises on acting considered here, however, iconic theatrical gestures are, in fact, held to bear a resemblance or analogy not only to external human behavior but to the internal processes of the mind. In his Chironomia, Bulwer maintains that "nature assigns to each motion of the mind its proper gesture, countenance and tone, whereby it is significantly expressed" (qtd. in Joseph 57), and claims that the hand gestures he catalogs "by themselves do speak and show the mental spring from whence they come" (qtd. in Joseph 8). In his work of the same name published in Lamb's day, Gilbert Austin discusses that class of gestures in which "some resemblance in the gesture is substituted for the feelings of the mind" (479), explaining that "analogous gestures, represent the feelings of the mind, in a manner
similar to those of the body, as when in refusing assent the hand pushes as it were the ideas aside" (480). Once again, Lear's madness serves as an apt example of the analogy between external gesture and internal state of mind. As Lear recalls the ingratitude of his daughters, he recoils from the memory, exclaiming "That way madness lies" (3.4.21). Using this moment as the basis for his illustration of the gesture representing "painful recollection," Henry Siddons explains:

There does not really exist any exterior object from which this miserable father need avert his eyes with fear--yet, notwithstanding, he suddenly turns round from the spot where he had first been stationed, seeking as it were, with one hand reversed, to endeavor to push away this miserable and tormenting recollection. (61)

It may be questioned whether such a gesture is truly an icon of the feeling it represents--whether it can be said to bear a resemblance in any real sense to what is, after all, an invisible and largely unexplained electro-chemical process of the brain. But, as Peirce points out, an iconic signifier can resemble its signified merely by acting as a kind of diagram of the relations within it: "many diagrams resemble their objects not in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness
consists" (282). The analogous relation between the mental process of chasing away a painful memory and the gesture shown by Siddons has been known at least since the time of St. Augustine, who in discussing the subject of memory in general and the dismissal of unwanted memories in particular, says of the latter, "these I drive away with the hand of my heart, from the face of my remembrance" (173).

Several actors, faced with the challenge of the mad scenes, and either familiar with Lamb's essay or, perhaps, intuiting the problem of portraying the complexities of the mind on stage, have relied on analogous gestures to at least suggest the internal workings of Lear's consciousness. Henry Irving employed such a gesture:

Irving's Lear, already shadowed by insanity, made visual his perception of how he must escape his thoughts: he literally shunned them, with a sudden, wayward rush forward, as of a man in dream-horror fleeing from an image that almost stops his breath. (Rosenberg 203)

In our own century, Morris Carnovsky also found an analogous gesture for his Lear's inner state: "His hand went to his forehead, and, unable to quiet the storm within, the fingers traced circles in the air to reflect the whirling of the mind" (Rosenberg 201). This gesture was similar to that earlier adopted by the distinguished Russian actor Solomon
Mikhoel, who used the "recurrent imagery of trying to find, with his forefinger, the mystery that eluded him" (Rosenberg 201).

But Lamb is apparently unconvinced that a mere analogy between external gesture and internal psychic process is adequate to reveal the human mind, in all its complexity, on the stage. Lamb holds that the actor is incapable of revealing "the motives and grounds of passion," maintaining that "of these the actor can give no more idea by his face or gesture than the eye (without metaphor) can speak, or the muscles utter intelligible sounds" (1: 114). For Lamb, there is a kind of impregnable opacity in the expressive means available to an actor, which prevents the fullest revelation of a character's inner being.

Perhaps, though, the actor has more means at his disposal than Lamb realized and resources which go beyond the iconic, analogous gesture. Only by considering the expressive capabilities of the third type of gesture classified here--the motivated, indexical gesture--can the full range of an actor's signifying powers be known.

There is at the outset, however, an inherent difficulty with those psychologically motivated gestures which would appear under Barthes' dichotomy as "simple reality." Lying at the opposite pole from symbolic gesture, indexical gestures lack that tremendous economy of expression
mentioned by Barthes above. To continue using Barthes' terminology, it may be said that, in the sign system of indexical gestures, there is an infinitely varied "plane of content"--the human mind, its thoughts and feelings--but a highly restricted "plane of expression"--the limited number of physical responses arising from this internal activity (Elements 39, 89). It would actually be more precise to say that, though the number of possible physical responses is vast, only a relatively small number of these are generally recognized as having signifying potential. Facial expression serves as a good example here, since the face is probably the most indexically expressive part of the body. Nevertheless, Ray L. Birdwhistell, one of the leading figures in the modern field of kinesics--the science of gestural communication--notes that while there are some 250,000 possible facial expressions, he needs only fifteen placement symbols plus eleven special markers to record all the significant positions of all the faces he has seen (8). Because of this wide disparity between the planes of content and expression, a single facial expression is inherently polysemous, capable of being interpreted in widely divergent ways. Vsevolod Pudovkin, the great Russian silent film director, records the experiment he performed with Lev Kulsehov of the Moscow Film School, in which a single closeup of an expressionless actor was intercut with shots
of a bowl of soup, a dead woman in a coffin, and a child playing with a toy. Audiences praised the brilliant subtlety of the "performance" as the actor apparently saw and reacted to each image in turn (Lindgren 98-101). This example also points out the classic cinematic solution to the polysemy of facial expression, the use of editing to link the facial response syntagmatically with a specific stimulus. In the theatre, however, the actor is generally without such syntagmatic support, and must be his own expressive entity.

The same principle also applies to physical gestures. Austin declares early in his *Chironomia* that "the variety of gestures, of which the human figure is capable, in all the motions, positions, and combinations of the head, the body and the limbs, may almost be accounted infinite" (293). Nevertheless, he insists that within this variety there is "a similarity and relation among the gestures, which affords opportunity for classification and nomenclature" (293) and inspires him with the confidence to develop his system of notation. While we may view such an attempt with skepticism, it is essentially no different in aim from the more subtle system developed by Birdwhistell, who maintains that he needs less than one hundred symbols for any kinesic subject, covering activity of the entire body (8). Thus one might accept Lamb's critique and conclude that there is an inherent limitation to the body as an expressive instrument.
However, a challenge to such a view may be derived from an unlikely source. C. S. Lewis, literary critic and author of popular theological apologetics, was neither a man of the theatre nor a semiotician. Nonetheless, his 1944 essay "Transposition," actually a sermon preached at Mansfield College, Oxford, wrestles with a dilemma which has an indirect bearing on the problem of theatrical gesture. Lewis considers certain varieties of religious experience, such as talking in tongues or the imagery of the mystics, which bear a disturbing resemblance to erotic or psychotic experiences of a wholly secular nature. While his resolution of this particular issue need not concern us, the principle he advances in developing his argument is worth noting.

Lewis points out that a single internal sensation, such as a particular type of flutter in the stomach, can accompany widely diverse, even opposite feelings, such as aesthetic delight, falling in love, or seasickness. For Lewis, this suggests an important distinction: "I take our emotional life to be 'higher' than the life of our sensations--not, of course morally higher, but richer, more varied, more subtle" (59). He argues that the system of physical sensations does respond to any and all emotions, but since that physical system is more limited in range than the emotional, a simple one-to-one correspondence between
the two systems is not possible. As Lewis maintains, "If the richer system is to be represented in the poorer at all, this can only be by giving each element in the poorer system more than one meaning" (60). He clarifies this idea of translation from a richer to a poorer system with such examples as a piano transcription of a piece originally written for symphony orchestra, in which "the same piano notes which represent flutes in one passage must also represent violins in another" (60).

Lewis' notion of a wide range of emotions translated into a limited range of internal physical sensations has clear affinities with the disparity between the infinitely varied internal "plane of content" and the limited external "plane of expression" discussed above in regard to indexical gestures. His idea of the necessity of "transposition," allowing each element in the poorer system to have more than one meaning, corresponds to the necessarily polysemous character of gesture and facial expressions mentioned earlier.

Along with this disparity between richer and poorer systems, however, Lewis maintains that, at least in some such relationships, something else is at work. While he argues that the relation between speech and writing is purely symbolic--"the one is simply a sign of the other and signifies it by convention" (62)--he describes the relation
between emotions and physical sensations in a way which adds a new dimension to Peirce's definition of an index as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object" (248):

The very same sensation does not merely accompany, nor merely signify, diverse and opposite emotions, but becomes part of them. The emotion descends bodily, as it were, into the sensation and digests, transforms, transubstantiates it, so that the same thrill along the nerves is delight or is agony. (Lewis 63)

The kinesic researcher Daniel N. Stern seems to draw much the same conclusion. In an interview with the noted modern theatre director Richard Schechner, in which he points out that, unlike language, "gestures aren't symbols" (Stern 117), Stern discusses the close relationship between internal state and physical response, saying that "laughter doesn't mean joy, laughter is joy . . . it expresses joy to someone else, but to the laugh, laughter is part of joy" (118). Lewis posits a certain mystery in this intimate, indexical relation between signifier and signified:

It is a sign, but also something more than a sign, and only a sign because it is also more than a sign, because in it the thing signified is really in a certain mode present. If I had to name the
relation I should call it not symbolical but sacramental. (62-63)

The Anglican Communion to which Lewis belonged defines a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" (Book of Common Prayer 581). In discussing physical responses to internal states, Lewis is ultimately leading up to a theological point. But the sacramental principle he describes may be considered in a theatrical context as well. The twentieth-century visionary of the theatre Antonin Artaud took as his goal "to create a metaphysics of speech, gesture, and expression" (90), and though his work remained largely theoretical, it had a decisive influence on Jerzy Grotowski, director of the Polish Theatre Laboratory of the 1960's. While eschewing any metaphysic, Grotowski nevertheless adopts a sacramental approach to theatre in his efforts to instill a "secular holiness" in his actors (34). He maintains that, through an arduous, ascetic, almost monastic regimen, "we reach the point where the actor, released from his daily resistances, profoundly reveals himself through a gesture" (130). And the effect of this indexical gesture is a kind of elimination of the barrier between signifier and signified:

The result is freedom from the time-lapse between the inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction.
Impulse and action are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns, and the spectator sees only a series of visible impulses. (Grotowski 16)

Although one might be skeptical of such a claim, at least one reviewer, Josef Kelera, became convinced after watching the performance of Ryszard Cieslak, Grotowski's principle actor, in the title role of Calderon's The Constant Prince:

Until now, I accepted with reserve the terms such as "secular holiness," "act of humility," "purification" which Grotowski uses. Today I admit that they can be applied perfectly to the character of the Constant Prince. A sort of psychic illumination emanates from the actor. I cannot find any other definition. In the culminating moments of the role, everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within, light, literally imponderable. At any moment the actor will levitate . . . He is in a state of grace. (qtd. in Grotowski 109)

Here is the indexical side of Barthes' dichotomy of permissible signs par excellence: an "internal," "deeply rooted," "visceral" relation between gesture and impulse. But nevertheless, Grotowski seems to suggest that his theatre can also employ "total artifice" in a way that
straddles Barthes' unbridgeable dichotomy. For Grotowski, "there is no contradiction between inner technique and artifice" (17). On the contrary, "we find that artificial composition not only does not limit the spiritual but actually leads to it" (17). This leads Grotowski to a highly stylized, almost ritualistic movement of a symbolic or iconic character, which nonetheless retains its thoroughly "motivated," indexical nature. In fact, as Grotowski maintains, such stylization is more rather than less true to life:

At a moment of psychic shock, a moment of terror, of mortal danger or tremendous joy, a man does not behave "naturally." A man in an elevated spiritual state uses rhythmically articulated signs, begins to dance, to sing. A sign, not a common gesture, is the elementary integer of expression for us. (Grotowski 18)

Perhaps, then, Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory provides at least one example of a unification of indexical, iconic, and symbolic gesture, though the means of such a "sacramental" synthesis may be an ultimately irreducible mystery.

It might be objected that, in considering such esoteric and experimental techniques as Grotowski's, we have come a long way from Shakespeare and King Lear. Grotowski did
mount Shakespearean productions, as well as the plays of such classic dramatists as Marlowe and Calderon, but took free license with the texts of these works, thus leaving open the question of whether his techniques can be applied to an unadulterated Lear.

There are, in fact, some significant parallels between Grotowski's work and Shakespeare's tragedy. Grotowski's technique of the self-sacrificing actor found its fullest and most characteristic expression in The Constant Prince, a work which revolves around the "martyr" portrayed by Cieslak (98). Similarly, the central action of Lear is described by Lamb as a "living martyrdom" (1: 125). The agony of Cieslak's prince borders on its opposite: "the Prince's ecstasy is his suffering" (98). While this sounds disconcertingly paradoxical, it is no more so than A. C. Bradley's observation on Lear's vision at the moment of death: "The agony in which he actually dies is one not of pain but of ecstasy" (241). In both works, human suffering and joy are pushed to the extreme limits at which they touch upon one another.

Admittedly, Grotowski's theatre places far less reliance than Shakespeare's on the spoken word, focusing instead on the actor's body and gestures. In The Constant Prince, Cieslak revealed his character's inner state through little more than the contortions of his nearly-naked body,
reduced to the barest essentials of expression. But this very notion of "stripping down" is central to Lear. In the midst of the storm, and of the madness which has resulted from the tempest in his mind, Lear contemplates the mad, naked beggar Poor Tom, noting that "unaccommodated man" is no more than a "poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.101-02). He attempts to reduce himself to the same state by tearing off his own clothes with a cry of "Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (3.4.103). At the end of the play, just before death and release from his suffering, Lear again attempts to escape the trappings of his garments: "Pray you undo this button" (5.3.310). Nakedness becomes a recurring theme of the play. Lear prays for the "poor naked wretches" caught in the storm (3.4.28), and the disguised Edgar is repeatedly addressed as "naked fellow" (3.4.40, 51).

Given this emphasis on the naked body, it is worth recalling Lamb, Coleridge and Bradley's comparisons of Lear to masterworks in other media. The one artist whose name came up in each instance was Michelangelo. The comparison with Michelangelo--whether to the sculpted nudes in the Medici Chapel or the great Sistine Chapel frescoes to which the artist brought a sculptor's tactile sense of the body--suggests the physicality of Lear, its emphasis on the flesh. In The Masks of King Lear, Marvin Rosenberg insists upon "the bruised flesh, the very thing itself, as a
central symbol in the design" (9). Rosenberg goes on to catalog the various manifestations of the flesh in Lear:

Shakespeare made the tissue and function of the physical body omnipresent in Lear, in name and action: arm, leg, hand, skin, hair, face, eyes, nose, cheeks, tears, blood; the body suffering, or being made to suffer, by blinding, tripping, striking, biting, bleeding, wounding--itself or another--or killing. (9)

For Rosenberg, this emphasis on physical manifestation takes on a ritualistic significance: "The throned, ritual king must unbutton on the straw of a hovel; through the ritual furred gown, later torn, a half-naked aging body must appear" (8-9). Finally, this aspect of ritual assumes a sacramental overtone which prompts Rosenberg to a specifically Christian analogy: "As well take from the drama of crucifixion the nails in the flesh, the vinegar in the parched mouth, as the physical details of this tragedy" (9).

One may question the propriety of such an analogy, but it does not go beyond what Lamb himself could say about the most powerful tragic dramas:

The expression of this transcendent scene almost bears us in imagination to Calvary and the Cross; and we seem to perceive some analogy between the scenical sufferings which we are here
contemplating, and the real agonies of that final completion to which we dare no more than hint a reference. (1: 58)

The above quote, from Lamb's 1808 essay "Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets," refers to the final catastrophe of John Ford's The Broken Heart. But it is hard not to see the imagery applying even more appropriately to Lear, whom Lamb describes as undergoing "the flaying of his feelings alive" (1: 125). Shakespeare himself has Edgar refer to Lear's sufferings, in terms reminiscent of Passion imagery, as a "side-piercing sight" (4.6.85). Seen in this light, Lear, like The Constant Prince, takes on the aspect of a modern mystery play, and can employ, perhaps cries out for, the kind of "holiness" of the actor, the "sacramental" exhalation of the flesh and the language of gesture, which Grotowski has at least sporadically achieved.

But although Lamb himself could discuss tragedy in terms bordering on the religious, he never applied such imagery to the stage. His reaction to The Broken Heart, as to Lear, was based on reading the play rather than viewing a performance. As Jonathan Arac has perceptively pointed out, "Lamb was a scriptualist, not a ritualist: for him the letter alone gave life, not the attempts to give it body and voice" (214). This religious imagery is echoed in the remarks of Michael Booth, who sees Lamb as adhering to the
belief that the theatre's function is "the communication of an already supreme Word, and that all elements of production exist only to serve and enhance the material realization of this Word" (21). Such an attitude may be contrasted with Grotowski's, who maintains that "the important thing is not the words but what we do with these words, what gives life to the inanimate words of the text, what transforms them into "the Word" (58). To carry the religious analogy further, for Lamb the text itself was the life-giving Word, while Grotowski's theatre is the realm of the incarnate Word, of the Word made flesh. Perhaps Lamb had simply become impervious to the magic of the theatre, the ritualistic, sacramental elements which he had been able to appreciate, however briefly, as a child. In his later essay "My First Play," he vividly describes the wonder of his first visit to the theatre as a child of six, and how, on a later visit some six or seven years later, the spell was broken: "I had left the temple a devotee, and was returned a rationalist" (6: 114). Although he was later able to enjoy the theatre again, forming a more mature appreciation of it, it may well be that for Lamb that initial sense of magic and mystery never returned. Lamb simply may not have had an affinity for theatre elevated to the "sacramental" plane. And for that reason he could not help but see King Lear, the play which most requires such a theatre if it is to succeed, as unsuited to the stage.
CONCLUSION

Lamb offers a challenge to those aspects of the theatre which intrude upon his appreciation of Shakespeare. As the previous chapters have shown, he chafes against the distracting claims of the actor-audience relationship, the "non-essential" additions contributed by particular actors, the sometimes unpleasant physical manifestations which impede understanding of a character's internal motivations, and the actor's limited expressive means. In each case, it appears that Lamb wishes to dispense with the theatre because he sees it as a filtering medium, subject to accidental variables and extraneous additions, through which his experience of Shakespeare is imperfectly transmitted. Reading comes to represent a more direct, unadulterated encounter with Shakespeare's artistic achievement.

Lamb's reverence for the written word should not be denigrated, especially since it had salutary effects upon the theatre. He took a strong stance against the tampering with Shakespeare's texts which had been a legacy from the eighteenth century, and it was his criticism which helped to reinstate Shakespeare's original texts in the theatre. In his essay he points out the inadequacies of the Nahum Tate
adaptation of *King Lear*, which eliminated the Fool, added a love interest between Edgar and Cordelia, and provided a happy ending with Lear still alive at the play's end. Lamb bitterly denounced this last feature. In 1820, eight years after the publication of Lamb's essay, Edmund Kean played Lear for the first time, and with the original tragic ending restored. Kean's biographer, F. W. Hawkins, says that in returning to Shakespeare's original the actor was "stimulated by Hazlitt's remonstrances and Charles Lamb's essays" (2: 212). Lamb also played an indirect role in the ultimate restoration of the complete Shakespearean text of *Lear*. In 1831, three years before his death at age fifty-nine, Lamb met the then nineteen-year-old John Forster, who went on to echo many of Lamb's views in his own writings for the *New Monthly Magazine* and the *Examiner* (Davies 444-47). Forster also happened to be a friend of William Macready, the next great actor to appear after Kean, and it was Forster who influenced Macready to restore the complete text of *Lear* at a time when the actor had reservations about such a move (Davies 449). Thus, although Lamb scoffed at Tate's adaptation in order to demonstrate that the *Lear* Shakespeare actually wrote is too overwhelming for the stage, ironically he helped instigate the textual restoration which disproved his argument.
Lamb's respect for the written text is laudatory, but it is perhaps not such an unshakeable foundation for an aesthetic as he supposes. For language itself, like the theatre, is an artificial and often intractable medium. Although, as Michael Booth points out, Lamb revels in "the immovable and unchanging textual object" (18), in fact even the text is not immutable. In Shakespeare's texts, uncertainties and variant readings abound, sometimes reflecting authorial revision or perhaps indecision. And even those works least in need of editorial intervention are not therefore tied to one set meaning, for language is both an artificial convention in itself and a reflection of other transitory human customs and conventions. Whether these institutions are held to define language or vice versa, the dynamic relation between them insures a continual shift in the meanings of individual words and of the texts they form. Shakespeare's writings had amassed new layers of meaning for Lamb's day, just as they have for our own. In "Burnt Norton," T. S. Eliot has aptly described this flux, perhaps erosion, of language:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (5.149-53)
Lamb himself seems to have been aware of this dilemma, or at least of the generally problematic character of language. For whatever justice there may be in Michael Booth's portraying Lamb as relying on the "supreme Word" of the text, or Jonathan Arac's calling him a literary "scriptualist," Lamb is ambivalent toward the written text and the medium of language, just as he is toward the theatre:

But in all the best dramas, and in Shakespeare above all, how obvious it is, that the form of speaking, whether it be in soliloquy or dialogue, is only a medium, and often a highly artificial one, for putting the reader or spectator into possession of that knowledge of the inner structure and workings of mind in a character, which he could otherwise never have arrived at in that form of composition by any gift short of intuition. (1: 115-16)

It is significant that here, for once, Lamb puts reading a play and viewing a performance in the same category. Both the spectator, and, to an even greater degree, the reader, are dependent upon the "highly artificial" medium of language. This view informs Lamb's statement that Hamlet's solitary musings are "reduced to words for the sake of the reader, who must else remain
ignorant of what is passing there" (1: 117). One catches a hint of Hamlet's own exasperated cry of "words, words, words" (2.2.191). Aside from the off-hand, highly questionable assumption that Shakespeare's plays were intended for the reader rather than the theatre audience, it is striking to hear Lamb imply that even Shakespeare's language is no more than an inevitable reduction of the dramatist's conception.

Such comments suggest that, if he could, Lamb would dispense with any artistic medium whatever and commune directly with the mind of Shakespeare and with the timeless, abstract images it has produced. But this extreme version of the intentional fallacy leads nowhere. There is no direct approach to Shakespeare's inspiration. The experiencing of any work of art is an inductive process, an assimilation and processing of myriad bits of information—whether words, musical notes, areas of pigment, or vocal and gestural utterances. While the assimilation of this material involves the discernment of pattern and order within it, the multiplicity of informational units, along with the variables involved in processing them, precludes the possibility of there being a single, "correct" response. Rather than offering an escape into a realm of ideal, timeless abstraction, each reading of a text involves a linear, temporal progression and is as much of a distinct
event as a theatrical performance. Not only is today's reader inevitably going to experience Shakespeare's text differently from Lamb, but other readers of Lamb's own day would have read the play differently from him as well, despite his dubious equating of his own interpretation with "everybody's Shakespeare" mentioned above. And even Lamb himself, or any reader, would read a text differently when reapproaching it later in life or even later in the day. The shifting complex of emotions, beliefs and experiences one brings to each reading insure that it will be a unique event. In fact it is only this particularization of each reading experience, this constant finding of something new in each encounter—the equivalent of the theatrical "illusion of the first time"—which gives the text lasting value. And what is true of reading is also true of the act of reflecting upon, contemplating what one has read. Each such mental excursion follows its own particular, unretraceable path.

All of this may well be a truism, but it is a truism which seems to refute Lamb's unspoken presuppositions. As Arac maintains, Lamb may well have been part of the general romantic shift to author-centered poetics. But there is ultimately no way to reach full communion with an author. In Lamb's case the attempt seems to have become a forlorn effort to bypass the artistic media to locate an
unreachable, absolute Shakespeare, who, since he cannot be
found, must finally be created by the reader. Thus the
apotheosis of the author imperceptibly turns into a
solipsistic cult of the reader. Coleridge has been taken to
task for creating a Hamlet in his criticism who is as much a
reflection of Coleridge as he is of Shakespeare. And this
Hamlet, for whom the external world is nothing and the
internal life is all, may be seen as emblematic of the
romantic turn from the transitory externals of the theatre,
even from the shifting flux of language itself, toward the
search for an impossible, transcendent contact with the
authorial genius itself.

Lamb's condemnation of the theatre does not succeed,
since the very impulse which prompts it ultimately leads to
a dead end. Admittedly, theatrical production involves the
interaction of sometimes discordant elements. For every
excellence of Shakespeare's text which is illuminated,
another is obscured. But this communal, cooperative,
sometimes chaotic dynamic may well be more expressive of
Shakespeare's particular genius than the hermetic isolation
of Lamb's ideal reader. The interaction of audience and
actor, the association of dramatic characters with living,
particularized faces, the physical embodiment of even the
most disturbing images, and the "sacramental" heightening of
all these elements into a ritual significance greater than
the sum of its parts, are an indispensable part of Shakespeare's artistry. One may follow Lamb in rejecting the theatre, but there is ultimately no refuge from the particular, the transitory, even the purely fortuitous. It will never cease being the stuff of Shakespeare's art, any more than it will cease being the stuff of life.
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