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The Work of Play and the Pleasures of Work in Mary Lamb's *Mrs. Leicester's School*

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<1>“I cannot better employ my leisure hours than in contributing to the amusement of you my kind pupils, who, by your affectionate attentions to my instructions, have rendered a life of labour pleasant to me,” proclaims the teacher of *Mrs. Leicester's School*, Mary Lamb's 1808 children's book for Godwin's Juvenile Library, written in collaboration with her brother Charles (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* i). Uniting labor with leisure in the productive and pleasurable reciprocity of educational and social bonds, this teacher affirms dynamic potential in the work of educating young women. And yet her sentence to a “life of labour” also establishes the constraints of her position. We are invited to wonder whether there really would be no better use of her leisure time than to contribute to her students' amusement during her precious time off.

<2>Although Lamb's explicit critique of the pervasive curtailments to women's leisure would not appear until 1815 in her essay, “On Needle-work,” the seeds for that project had already been planted in the unlikely ground of this book for children. Here, girls come to school having had inadequate parental care, a parallel for the inadequacies in female education at large.⁽¹⁾ As a remedy and utopic alternative, *Mrs. Leicester's School* provides a harmonious environment and effective methods for the girls to engage in the active and pleasurable work of thinking, contributing, and learning. The teacher's ability to facilitate this type of education makes her own work both important and enjoyable. This is a stark contrast to what Lamb considers the empty and confining task of needlework. Nevertheless, in both *Mrs. Leicester's School* and in Lamb's essay “On Needle-work,” the situation of the caregiving woman is explicitly and implicitly critiqued. *Mrs. Leicester's School* affirms the need for responsible care by showing the traumatizing effects upon girls who, prior to school, had been largely abandoned. It affirms intellectual development as integral to the care and cultivation of girls and as empowering to their educators in turn. But it also lets on to the limitations upon the caregiver's freedom when the burden of care is not evenly distributed or reciprocal.

<3>*Mrs. Leicester's School* illuminates the underlying tension in “On Needle-work” between the necessity of responsible care and the need for self-fulfillment. It also gestures toward solutions, including extending the role of caregiver beyond the sphere of women into the purview of men and children, and championing reciprocity of care. *Mrs. Leicester's School* models a balanced, harmonious, and effective conjoining of work and leisure in the educational, professional, and social lives of women and girls, while exposing critical concerns for nineteenth-century women, whose responsibility for others continually determined the choices they could make regarding the uses of their time.

I. "Positive Leisure" and Wages for Needlework

<4>In order to unite labor and leisure in the form of pleasurable work and productive free time, Lamb recognized that it was essential first to untangle a mistaken conflation of labor and leisure in which women's apparent leisure was, in fact, tiring and time-consuming needlework—a seeming recreation that was in fact drudgery (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177). In a letter to the editor of the *British Lady's Magazine* in 1815, referred to since as her essay "On Needle-work," Lamb argued that the spheres of domestic leisure and domestic labor were so confused that women were not compensated for actual work, while also not able to benefit from the leisure of intellectual and social activity: "*Real Business* and *real leisure* make up the portions of men's time—two sources of happiness which we certainly partake of in a very inferior degree" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177 emphasis hers).(2) Meanwhile, women, though "perpetually lamenting [their] own idleness," are in fact "burthen[ed]" by the "minutiae" of their "daily employment," without "one quarter of an hour's positive leisure." In order for women to "be upon an equality with men, as far as respects the mere enjoyment of life," they must distinguish such laborious tasks as needlework from genuinely fulfilling "positive leisure" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 176-77).

<5>Lamb pleads on behalf of women who need not and should not make eye-straining, painstaking work their recreation. But she is equally motivated to protect women whose livelihoods depend, as hers once did, on needlework. Having worked eleven years as a cloak-maker under distressing conditions, Lamb is acutely aware of the plight of women for whom needlework is unequivocally work. Because it is the only viable source of income for women of lower classes, needlework must be recognized as work for remuneration. She calls upon her middle- and upper-class women readers to relinquish the needle as a leisurely pastime in order to support the demand and labor conditions of lower-class women in need of waged work (Lamb "On Needle-work" 178-79). If a woman genuinely enjoys needlework as a pastime, she should donate the money saved from not having to purchase textiles to the needle-workers who have been put out of work by this transfer of their labor into the leisured domestic sphere (Lamb "On Needle-work" 180). Lamb recognizes the harsh limitations of class upon the freedom of women to choose how to use their time. For the mutual benefit of women of lower and leisured classes alike, she proposes that women of the upper and middle classes, who have more flexibility, reject conventional uses of women's time in favor of activities that are also more productive and fulfilling for themselves. Affirming that "Needlework and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare," Lamb urges women with options to "direct" their "energy...to some wiser end" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 176-77).

<6>However, Lamb's account of this "wiser end" is indefinite and conflicted. It might be the "mere enjoyment of life," on "equality with men" who "can do what they like" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177). Or it might be better work: to foster the "general happiness" and "domestic comfort" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177). At its most extreme, Lamb even suggests that a woman's leisure hours should be spent in intellectual pursuits specifically to improve the quality of leisure of her husband (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177). But she also laments that

women are “more properly ranked among the contributors to, than the partakers of, the undisturbed relaxation of man” (Lamb “On Needle-work” 178). Across Lamb’s work, these types of leisure—time off, time to benefit oneself, and time to benefit others—at best conjoin, but at worst produce significant barriers and conflicts.

<7>Lamb’s very term “positive leisure” carries this important ambiguity. On the one hand, “positive” denotes “absolute” and “real” (definitions in Johnson’s *Dictionary*): real leisure untainted by work (Johnson 1538). Lamb suggests this sense of “positive” in her contrast of women’s work-filled “leisure” to the “*Real business and real leisure*” of “men’s time.” On the other hand, “positive” suggests a purposeful or effective quality: “having the power to enact any law,” in one of Johnson’s definitions, or, from the *OED* and in usage during Lamb’s time, “Proceeding, occurring, or reckoned in a direction taken as that of increase or of progress,” or “facilitating personal development or self-realization; characterized by the empowerment of individuals to fulfill their potential, rather than simply by absence of constraint.” There, “positive” implies its own work of benefit to oneself or others. Lamb’s call to women to make their leisure benefit the domestic “comfort” and to use their time toward a “wiser end,” such as improving themselves as “conversational companions,” also recalls a definition of “positive” with a first usage of 1886 but perhaps already emerging in Lamb’s time: “Consisting in or characterized by constructive action or attitudes; ... optimistic, good, beneficial, advantageous” (Lamb “On Needle-work” 177, *OED*). These possible meanings of “positive leisure” as pure leisure or productive leisure—and productive alternately as self-fulfillment or benefit to others—revolve within Lamb’s theorizing of the ethics and possibilities of women’s leisure in the early nineteenth century.

<8>It may be that Lamb’s purposing of women’s leisure for the fulfillment of a husband’s domestic comfort is simply an appeasement of conservative readers in order to more effectively argue for opportunities for women’s intellectual development. Women’s intellectual improvement is less of a threat to social and domestic order if it is figured as a better way to fulfill woman’s role as “helpmate.”(3) Lamb does indicate more subversive views in her potentially parodic italics in the phrase in which she uses the term “helpmate”: “the highest praise we can aim at is to be accounted the helpmates of *man*” (Lamb “On Needle-work” 177). Her italics throw into question this delimited object toward which all work and praise is directed. In similar statements about the “*happy English wife*” whose leisure ought to serve “her *good man*” to allow him “to feel his leisure hours *real substantial holyday*” her italics may seem over-insistent, as if containing, or suppressing questions about the ends of women’s work and women’s leisure in domestic service (Lamb “On Needle-work” 179, 177). When she states that women’s leisure must serve man “in return for all he does for us”—a reciprocity in which man “expects, and justly expects, us to do all in our power to soften and sweeten life,” one doubts whether Lamb is honestly appraising the situation, and suspects a strategic tempering of the radicalism of her argument (Lamb “On Needle-work” 177).

<9>However, it is also likely that Lamb’s invocation of the imperative to use one’s time to assist others, is, for her, genuinely “just,” particularly when there is such reciprocity between husband and wife. Mindful of the severe limitations to women determined by their class and

gender positions, Lamb nevertheless continues to value a social ethic in her vision of ideal uses of women's leisure time, particularly when there is mutual and reciprocal fulfillment. As in the mutual benefit to women of both the working and leisured classes in the allocation of needlework to the "industrious sisterhood" of wage laborers, Lamb envisions a distribution of work and care that fosters a "general happiness, and the domestic comfort of both sexes" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 176-7). Rather than rejecting women's obligations to others, Lamb proposes to extend the radius of women's efforts and care. Lamb contrasts men's "*Real business*" with "feminine duties (that generic term for all our business)" which "cannot aspire to...a consoling importance" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 177). Her remedy to this difference is to expand the scope and importance of women's effectiveness upon others. For Lamb, women's leisure often remains its own type of work, involving effort and even sacrifice.(4) Yet, in conjoining labor and leisure toward "wiser ends," Lamb also expresses profound possibilities for pleasure in work and for mutual fulfillment in caregiving relationships.

<10>*Mrs. Leicester's School* models a world in which women's efforts are not constrained along gendered lines: women extend their care beyond their "father, son, husband, or brother" (Lamb "On Needle-work" 178) – the purported object of care in one passage of "On Needle-work" – toward other women. The role of caregiver is, in turn, assumed not only by women but also by men. The schoolgirls and their woman teacher engage in productive amusements and tasks of "consoling importance." Nevertheless, just as the distinction between leisure and business slips in Lamb's "On Needle-work," in which women's leisure time quickly becomes time to do better work for others, work and play are often indistinguishable in *Mrs. Leicester's School*. Sometimes this is a harmonious conjunction, forecasting the more productive and pleasurable uses of time that "On Needle-work" envisions. But sometimes this is a confused conflation. *Mrs. Leicester's School* casts darker shadows: the excessive burden of care allocated to women, the isolations of domestic life, and the exigencies of financial need.(5)

II. "I Cannot Better Employ My Leisure Hours": The Pleasures of Work and Limits

<11>The teacher in *Mrs. Leicester's School* rarely features in critical discussions, which focus on the schoolgirls' stories.(6) Yet this teacher is a critical focus for questions of one-way care, women's intellectual stimulation, and personal fulfillment. More than an occasion for the stories that follow, this teacher, named only by the initials "M.B.," frames and focuses the schoolgirls' narratives with the complexities attending the caregiving woman: the rewards of the position but also the limits. This makes the playful education of her charges all the more urgent.

<12>The opening pages of *Mrs. Leicester's School* are M.B.'s letter of "Dedication" to her students, composed during a vacation at the end of term. She has transcribed the conversations and life stories shared by her schoolgirls on their first night of school, assembling a sort of schoolroom *Decameron*. M.B. describes how she "arranged [her] materials after you were retired to rest" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* ii). A vivid image emerges of her toiling industriously while her students are at ease. She devotes her leisure to labor for another's pleasure, like the woman of Lamb's "On Needle-work," who makes "her *good man* ... feel his leisure hours *real*

substantial holyday, and perfect respite from the cares of business!” (Lamb “On Needle-work” 177). As she transcribes in the dark hours of night, students’ eyes shut, we encounter the invisibility of this teacher’s labor in her devotion to the leisure of those in her care.

<13>Lamb deftly makes this character play two possible roles: the menial secretary but also the creative artist. M.B. calls herself “amanuensis” for her young ladies, committed to “preserv[ing], as exactly as I could, your own words, and your own peculiarities of style and manner” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* viii). This is on the same page as “copying writings,” one of the remunerative labors that Lamb’s “On Needle-work” specifies for lower class women because it requires little education (Lamb “On Needle-work” 178). At the same time, M.B. is more than amanuensis. She refers to her role as “historiographer,” and she is a skillful collaborator, with artistic values: “Little inaccuracies must be pared away, and the whole must assume a more formal and correct appearance” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* viii). She shapes the work beyond merely stylistic concerns: “My own way of thinking, I am sensible, will too often intrude itself” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* viii). This may be cast as an apology, but her intellectual influence remains legible. At the end of her introduction, when she signs her name using only the initials “M.B.” she similarly inscribes her authority with an unobtrusive yet visible trace of her crucial presence (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* viii). That these are the first and last letters of “Mary Lamb,” as well as the last two letters of “Lamb,” is perhaps Lamb’s hint at her own authorial position, at once present and concealed with only a trace. Like many women authors of her time, Lamb published anonymously and expressed discomfort with the authority of her position.⁽⁷⁾ Figuring herself, as many women authors did, and as M.B. does, in the role of invisible selfless laborer in the service of children, she also wields a powerful cultural authority as creator, author, and educator.

<14>One mode of women’s cultural agency in the early nineteenth century was as educators and children’s writers. Although the role of governess or a post like M.B.’s would have been considered a lowly position-- Mary Wollstonecraft described it as a “humiliating situation,” and lamented that women governesses were “not treated like the tutors of sons,” and nineteenth-century novels routinely depict the race toward marriage as a way of avoiding this fate—the potential for shaping the minds of the next generation also had vast social implications (Wollstonecraft 339). Lamb’s contemporary Hannah More proclaimed the “power” of women educators to form “the principles of the whole rising generation,” a circumstance that Mitzi Myers, Jean Marsden, and Anne Mellor have illuminated (More I 59-60, Marsden 31, Mellor *Mothers of the Nation* 30). *Mrs. Leicester’s School* represents excitement and potential in the work of educating girls, of precisely the “consoling importance” that Lamb calls for in women’s activities in “On Needle-work.” In *Mrs. Leicester’s School*, Lamb suggests that the very novelty of girls’ education, an effect of social limitation, is also a creative opportunity. The storytelling project originates, in part, because the school is in its first year and, “unlike” the culture of “an old established school,” there is no older student to guide the new students. M.B. writes, “These thought I, have their own amusements to invent; their own customs to establish” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* iii). The unprecedentedness of these girls’ education, and perhaps of women’s education at large, opens radical possibilities.

<15>M.B. herself is a model of inventiveness and ingenuity. Having to improvise in a room full of teary-eyed girls on their first night of school, she writes, “the idea came into my mind, which has since been a source of amusement to you in the recollection, and to myself in particular has been of essential benefit” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* iv). Her inspired idea—that the girls share their stories to establish their new community and begin their process of education—she describes as mutually beneficial. Yet the benefit to herself is ultimately a benefit to her schoolgirls: “it enabled me to form a just estimate of the dispositions of you my young pupils, and assisted me to adapt my plan of future instructions to each individual temper” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* iv). A model of reciprocity, we witness a rapid transfer of benefit between teacher and students. She benefits from coming up with a way to console the girls. They, in turn, benefit from cheering up and learning about each other. The teacher then benefits from learning about her students’ inner lives, and the students finally benefit from their teacher knowing this about them in order to better instruct them. Yet it remains a question whether M.B. herself is fulfilled beyond the ability to form a “just estimate” of her students in order to serve them better.

<16>This question sounds elsewhere in M.B.’s frame narrative, even in its first paragraph. She is an emblem of personal fulfillment by reciprocity and sympathy in mutually beneficial caregiving relationships, but she is also always ultimately in the service of those in her care: “Though released from the business of the school, the absence of your governess confines me to Amwell during the vacation. I cannot better employ my leisure hours than in contributing to the amusement of you my kind pupils, who, by your affectionate attentions to my instructions, have rendered a life of labour pleasant to me” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* i). On one reading, this is an idyll of reciprocity in which labor and leisure are identical: the productive leisure and pleasurable labor that Lamb championed in “On Needle-work.” The proximity of the words “released,” “vacation,” “leisure,” “amusement,” “kind,” “affectionate,” and “pleasant,” alongside “business,” “confines,” “employ,” “contributing,” and “labour” gives them an aspect of slippage and interchangeability in which “leisure” and “labour,” “business” and “amusement” are one and the same. But on another reading, we have to ask: is this “vacation” or “confinement”? Her statement “I cannot better employ,” suggests a lack of choice as much as it claims a preference: “cannot” is not the same as “do not wish to,” “choose not to,” or “want to.” She is working while everyone else is on vacation, just as she transcribed while her students were at rest, and just as the woman of “On Needle-work” works to improve her husband’s leisure. The absence, or comparative freedom and mobility, of the higher ranked governess—presumably the head teacher, Mrs. Leicester— “confines” M.B to her position. Lamb’s irony in this passage makes M.B. an exemplar of the ideal of a fulfilling and effective productivity for women that simultaneously critiques the limits placed upon women, especially those of lower classes. D.A. Miller and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have illuminated the cloaked subversion by women authors of the period in their deployment of irony and “palimpsestic” forms “whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning” (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Isobel Armstrong has described the Victorian “double poem” that can be read simultaneously with a conventional and a subversive meaning (Armstrong 13). Lamb’s word choice and phrasing accordingly offer two possible readings of the degree of this teacher’s liberation and fulfillment in her work to

support others, which can quickly slip into a condition by which her own leisure is curtailed in favor of the leisure of others.

<17>Lamb's use of the word "confines" is telling. Mary Wollstonecraft, whom Lamb read, uses this word when she decries limitations upon women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "confined then in cages like the feathered race" (Wollstonecraft 118). She lambastes Rousseau's injunction to "accustom [women] early to such confinement" (qtd. in Wollstonecraft 181). "Confinement" is also the condition of Mary Lamb's own life when her role as caregiver is extended beyond her capacities and in an unreciprocated transfer of effort. Writing to Coleridge in 1796, Charles Lamb remarks that she cannot accompany him on a visit because "Mary is necessarily confined from ever sleeping out," (that is, out of the home), because she has to be "bed fellow" to her ailing mother who is "so entirely helpless (not having any use of her limbs)" (Lamb *Letters* I 34). The word "confined" is synonymous with this kind of necessity: "While my Brother's leg is so bad it is out of the question," Charles had written to Coleridge earlier that year, "We are necessarily confined with him the afternoon & evening till very late, so that I am stealing a few minutes to write to you" (Lamb *Letters* I 17). Both relationships of care—Mary's care of her mother and of her older brother John—were marked by dramatic inequality and lack of reciprocity. John was "little disposed...at any time to take care of old age & infirmities," abandoning his family for his own professional pursuits, and returning only to demand care for his own injury (to Coleridge October 3, 1796, Lamb *Letters* I 48).

<18>This economy of unilateral care was extremely taxing. Charles knew how cold and unappreciative their mother was toward Mary, and guessed, too, that Mary's mental breakdowns were a consequence (Lamb *Letters* I 52). She had a complete breakdown, during needlework, in which she accidentally killed her mother. The report of the horror in the *Morning Chronicle* was sympathetic to Mary's distress and similarly attributed the event to the pernicious effects of excessive and unreciprocated care, noting that her "carriage towards her mother was ever affectionate in the extreme," and that her "increased attentiveness, which her parents' infirmities called for by day and night" likely led to "the present insanity" (qtd. in *Letters* I 45). Charles could similarly testify: "every act of duty & love she could pay, every kindness (& I speak true, when I say to the hurting of her health, & most probably in great part to the derangement of her senses)" (Lamb *Letters* I 52). Looming in the figure of M.B. is a risk of falling from "confinement" into the confinements of the asylum, a circumstance with which Mary Lamb was all too intimate.

<19>Yet for all this misery, Lamb also found deep enjoyments in, and ethical commitments to, the caregiving role. Contemporaries often praise her exemplary generosity and warm-heartedness. Charles wrote of Mary that "Of all the people I ever saw in the world my poor sister was most & thoroughly devoi[d] of the least tincture of selfishness" (Letter to Coleridge, October 3, 1796. Lamb *Letters* I 50). In his elegy for Charles Lamb, William Wordsworth described Mary as "the meek, / The self-restraining, and the ever-kind." Though maltreated by the Walden family with whom she resided after Charles's death, Mary chose to remain in order

to “mediate” between the children and their disturbed parents (Proctor to Talfourd, June 1841 qtd. in Aaron *ADS* 205).

<20>But even in such descriptions of Mary by others, the balance of care for others and care of the self is figured more in tension than in harmony. In all of the above examples, Lamb’s kindness toward others is figured as a denial of herself. Charles’s word “tincture” denotes not only “trace,” but also perhaps a medicinal quality of “selfishness,” which “poor” Mary lacks. Wordsworth’s attribution of “ever-kindness” is predicated on “self-restraint,” and Mary’s commitment to the Walden children was at the expense of her own wellbeing. Nevertheless, Mary maintained an ethic of generosity across her life, perhaps in response to her own experiences of receiving, or not receiving, care. She experienced both sides of caregiving, on the receiving end during her stays in private hospitals during her illness and at home with Charles. And she knew what it felt like to be denied care, especially from a mother.

<21>This sensitivity shapes the intense sympathy that Lamb gives M.B.’s care for her students. Like Lamb, M.B.’s own experiences of loss and isolation in *Mrs. Leicester’s School* foster her commitment to caring for her schoolgirls, with whom she sympathizes. The girls often tell of needing more care than they’ve been given and arrive at school shaken by leaving home. M.B. sympathetically remarks, “I also was sad; for I, like you, had parted from my friends, and the duties of my profession were new to me” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* iii). Caregiving that blossoms from sympathy fosters reciprocity. M.B.’s identification with her students’ “sadness” suggests personal fulfillment in the ability to help them. Sympathy also blends into professional “duty” for M.B., who, recognizing her position of power as an adult and as a professional, “consider[s]” the needs and perspectives of her students and commits herself to “divert” them from sorrow (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* iii). Her care and her professional competency are one and the same. That M.B.’s sympathetic care strengthens her professional authority and effectiveness with her students reflects Anne Mellor’s contention in *Mothers of the Nation* that women writers of the Romantic Period were deeply influential in the public sphere by bringing “moral virtue and an ethic of care” into the world of politics (Mellor 11-12). Such care is of “consoling importance” and benefits M.B. and students alike, offering M.B. a powerful and effective professional authority and personal fulfillment beyond confinement.

<22>The stories in *Mrs. Leicester’s School* have many scenes of caregiving in which an ethic of generosity is both upheld and more equitably distributed. Mary’s own relationship with her brother Charles, as Jane Aaron notes, was marked by a “distinctive reciprocity” of care that transcended the norms of their gender roles (Aaron *ADS* 2). In *Mrs. Leicester’s School*, not only do the children put in their share to attend to their teacher and to one another, but male characters are often the primary parent or educator. In the first story, “The Sailor Uncle,” this uncle returns to the domestic sphere from “beyond seas” to teach Elizabeth Villiers to read and to face the loss of her mother (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 18). In another story, “The Young Mahometan,” a doctor and his wife cure his young patient by engaging in domestic amusements and bringing her into a social world outside the home (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 108). In one of Charles’s stories, “The Sea Voyage,” a sailor takes on the role of “nurse” for a girl on an overseas journey, giving her “more than female attention” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 179). In

“The Changeling,” in which no one notices that two children have been switched, Mary even makes a jab at the prevailing norm of childcare allocated solely to women by snidely remarking, “gentlemen seldom take much notice of very young children” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 53). Lamb suggests that the caregiving role must be distributed so that it does not fall on disempowered classes to an unfair degree. She also encourages a widening of one’s sphere of exchange beyond the domestic. In the girls’ stories, and in the interpersonal exchange that is storytelling itself, reciprocity of care emerges as an object of education and a motive for the work of play at the heart of Mrs. Leicester’s curriculum. Moving beyond the “confines” of isolation, play brings the girls into exchange with others.

III. “You Have Told it all in the Play!” The Work of Play in *Mrs. Leicester’s School*

<23>Play is a serious business in *Mrs. Leicester’s School*. In two stories, play repairs the trauma of the death of a parent. In other stories, a visit to the fair or to the theater relieves profound distress and corrects misunderstandings. Play helps children to overcome possessive and isolationist tendencies. It facilitates symbolic thinking and creative production. In one story, play even upends a girl’s family by exposing the lies that adults around her have constructed. These scenes of play in *Mrs. Leicester’s School* are as educational as the formal curriculum, joining leisurely recreation with intellectual and social development. Play teaches reciprocity of care—the importance of sharing and participating in the world beyond oneself, giving and receiving.

<24>On the first night of school, M.B. encourages the girls to gather in the room “which we now call the play-room,” as she recalls in her “Dedication” written at the end of term (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* ii.). A social language has emerged over the course of the school year: that the students and their teacher have a shared term that they “now call” this room suggests the development of a community since their initial visit to this “play-room.” It is through play that this social lexicon, and the social relationships along with it, were initiated and formed. The purpose of the “play-room,” as a governess states, is for the girls to “play, and amuse themselves, and be as happy as they please this evening, that they may be well acquainted with each other before they enter the school-room to-morrow morning” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* ii-iii). A model of reciprocity, the girls’ opportunity to “amuse themselves” is also an opportunity to become “acquainted with each other.”

<25>In its commitment to the serious work and learning that play facilitates, Mrs. Leicester’s School is a proto-Kindergarten. Its regard for play as a critical early stage in education, along with M.B.’s regard for each child’s “disposition,” places Mary Lamb in the lineage of later nineteenth-century developments in progressive education in the work of Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel. But the writings of this later nineteenth-century cohort, along with those of their predecessors Locke and Rousseau, assumed a male subject of education. Lamb, however, chronicles a progressive, experiential, child-centered pedagogy specifically for girls. No finishing school, Mrs. Leicester’s does not teach etiquette or female accomplishments. Instead, the girls play and tell stories, and in doing so, learn, without dreary sermonizing, to reflect upon and correct their own mistakes and misunderstandings.

<26>The storytelling project fosters learning through sociability. M.B. promises that by sharing their stories, “You may then not look so unsociably upon each other.” They will find that they “please” fellow listeners while also enjoying being the “heroine of their own tale” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* v, vi, viii). Pleasurable reciprocal exchange replaces hierarchy and authoritative instruction. The stories themselves are connected in such a program, featuring adults and children playing productively together. In the first one, Elizabeth Villiers and her sailor uncle intersperse a “game of romps” with Elizabeth’s studies, studies that make Elizabeth “a little woman in understanding,” and a “companionable little being” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 22). The important work that play accomplishes in education and communication underpins Lamb’s promotion of leisure for adult women in “On Needle-work.” But, like the “conversational companion” of Lamb’s essay, even young Elizabeth Villiers’ leisure time is channeled toward the social imperative to be more “companionable” to others.

<27>Lamb’s language affirms the simultaneity and shared identity of work and play. When the girls draw lots to determine the order in which they tell their tales, M.B. first refers to it as “a little amusement in itself” and then, only one sentence later, describes this activity as “important business.” When the youngest schoolgirl attempts to interrupt the lot-drawing to talk about herself, M.B. encourages her to wait her turn rather than “interfere ... with the more important business of the lottery” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* vi). This playful “amusement” is “important business” because it determines a fair and equitable exchange in which each girl will get to share her story in its “proper order” in “turn” (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* vi). Play that models and organizes an equitable society that gives voice to each girl is of “consoling importance” and may be considered the type of “important business” that Lamb calls for in “On Needle-work” in contrast to women’s unidirectional self-sacrificing “duties.”

<28>Lamb’s essay “On Needle-work” is explicitly foreshadowed in “The Young Mahometan,” in which solitary needlework, figured in dangerous opposition to sociable exchange, causes one girl’s abandonment and mental collapse.⁽⁸⁾ Margaret Green’s mother and her mother’s employer have “almost wholly discontinued talking to [her]” because they are so absorbed in their needlework (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 102). Even the conversation they have is limited by this myopic fixation, though Margaret attests that her “mother is not particularly fond of needle-work”:

[Her mother’s employer] had been remarkably fond of needle-work, and her conversation with my mother was generally the history of some pieces of work she had formerly done; the dates when they were begun, and when finished; what had retarded their progress, and what had hastened their completion. If occasionally any other events were spoken of, she had no other chronology to reckon by, than in the recollection of what carpet, what sofa-cover, what set of chairs, were in the frame at that time. (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 95)

In this home in which needlework has co-opted history and replaced conversation, Margaret’s ability to play is also curtailed. She has her own “task of needle-work”—perhaps the cause of her “very weak” eyes (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 96). But even in her leisure hours, her play is similarly warped by isolation and fragmentation. She wanders the house in “as perfect solitude

as Robinson Crusoe" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 102). When she attempts to "make out [her] own solitary amusement," she stumbles upon broken and abandoned old toys no longer available for play: "an old broken battledore, and some shuttlecocks with most of the feathers missing" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 97). She finds a book on "Mahometism" with pages torn out and reads herself into a terrified frenzy about the afterlife of nonbelievers (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 101). Margaret is represented as socially, emotionally, and intellectually stunted by her confined social world and broken play objects. Interactive play is the necessary corrective to errors in thinking and the consolation for lack of care. A kind doctor and his wife "cure" Margaret of her distress and confusion with playful activities directed toward a world of exchange outside the confines of the home: a trip to the fair, "play ... at a geographical game," "conversation," and company of girls her own age (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 107-8). They "play at blindman's bluff," a game that announces its ability to work through Margaret's own blindness, both literal, from too much needlework, and figurative, from misunderstanding. In the context of play, the doctor and his wife "explain...very seriously, the error into which [Margaret] had fallen" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 109). "Very serious," but also an "amusement," Margaret's understanding emerges in the reparative sociable leisure of play.

<29>Nevertheless, the social context, which ostensibly repairs the sorrows and confusions of Margaret's isolation, itself remains pervasively flawed. It remains in play, so to speak, in Lamb's rendering, that the "correction" to Margaret's misunderstanding retains its own prejudices against non-Christian religion.⁽⁹⁾ The game of "blindman's bluff," too, casts its own disturbed shadows of making entertainment of disability. Such limits of society-at-large loom in Lamb's decision to have the doctor and his wife give Margaret a needle-case, pincushion, and work-basket along with the more interactive toys, as if to suggest that Margaret, for all her restorative social engagement, must still be trained up for domestic confinement (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 108).

<30>In Emily Barton's story, "Visit to the Cousins," play continues to attempt reparative sociability as a child moves from self-willed isolation and possessiveness into a recognition of the merits of reciprocal play with others. Mistreated by her cousins who refuse to share their toys, Emily is given toys of her own and replicates their selfishness: "The joy I discovered at possessing things I could call my own, and the frequent repetition of the words, *My own, my own*" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 123). This sentence is completed by her mother's "uneasiness" about this joy, and her intervention: "she invited a little girl to spend a few days with me" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 124). Not sharing and sharing toys is a social microcosm in which Lamb explores the dangers of too little reciprocity. Emily's mother helps her to correct this error and eventually all three attend the theater together. With a balcony view of adult leisure before them ("how leisurely they all came into the pit, and looked about them, before they took their seats"), the girls envision the benefits that lie ahead when lessons of shared leisure time have been internalized (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 128). Having learned generosity, Emily herself immediately benefits from her friend's company and her friend's explanation of the performance (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 128). Amidst the sociable leisure of the theater, Emily makes sense of herself, drawing a symbolic connection between the drama and events of her own life: "She thought she was dead, but she found him again, just as I did my papa and mamma" (Lamb

Mrs. Leicester 129). The play replicates and resolves Emily's grief at having been left at her cousins through its symbolism, discerned in exchange with her new friend.

<31>The symbolic work of play is repeated in Lamb's treatment of dolls, which gives this stereotypically female-gendered and oft-derided toy an intellectual seriousness. In Lamb's era, dolls were aligned with needlework as a superficial and isolationist feminine pastime. Wollstonecraft, invoking "confinement," critiqued play with dolls along these lines: "adorning her lifeless doll ... will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative," taking up Rousseau's charge that dolls exemplify girls' superficial interests in their use for dress-up and for imitating the frivolous interests of adult women (Wollstonecraft 84, 87). But in *Mrs. Leicester's School*, dolls function interactively and prompt the intellectual work of symbolism. In Ann Withers' play, dolls "personate the two children" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 65). In Louisa Manners' story, Louisa teaches her sister about the unfamiliar London by using toys and dolls to represent places and family members there (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 40). Elinor Forester "imitates" her deceased mother by singing to a doll that represents her infant self (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 88). Dolls may be the recipients of girls' care, but, in *Mrs. Leicester's School*, their symbolism does emotionally reparative work for the girls as well. Elinor's doll connects her to her absent mother, Ann's to her lost family origins depicted in her performance, Louisa's to her former home. These emotional connections lead to intellectual ones. Elinor's stepmother helps her to overcome her loss through "playing" and simultaneously learning to read in her mother's former room, now the "repository of all [Elinor's] playthings, and also [her] schoolroom" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 92). Girls' play does serious and "consoling" work in its exchange with other people and its representative engagement with the outer world.

<32>The representative and communicative potential of play in *Mrs. Leicester's School* is shown to bring new possibilities into being. Ann Withers tells the story of how she created a "play"—a theatrical production—in which her imaginative work manages to bring about a destructive outcome in the upending of her family order. When her playmate tells her the secret that the two girls had been switched at birth by the servant who wanted her own daughter to enjoy her employer's class status, Ann expresses the story in the play she writes and performs. "You have told it all in the play!" shouts her friend from the audience, and Ann, restored to her birth mother, loses the mother with whom she had grown up (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* 67). Social exchange and representative play powerfully expose concealed truths. While Ann attributes her demise to her unoriginality (she copied a true story when she should have invented something new), it is more the originating power of her expository work of revealing and of creating that accounts for her demise. Ann demonstrates the power of play to expose and, through exposing, to shape life.

<33>Ann Withers is a double for M.B. and for Mary Lamb herself in her portrayal of the risks and anxieties, as well as possibilities, attending women's play. M.B., like Ann, considers herself a mere copyist, but we also witness her innovative power, the creative efficacy that is Lamb's own. One certainly risks much when one "tells it all in the play," as Lamb herself does. In her own creative authorship of *Mrs. Leicester's School*, and in her exposition in her essay "On Needle-work," Lamb uncovers the lies and disguised disorder in women's worlds, as well as the

biases and contingencies of social identity. Like Ann, Lamb upends family order by “telling it all in the play” of her language—language that critiques and that complicates the norms of the family structure with its shrewd understanding of the limitations and possibilities for the uses of women’s time. As Lamb reveals, women’s play is both serious and necessary. Her imagined girls’ school promotes the possibility of play that encourages reciprocity, the only way to promote the fulfillment of others and of oneself. In her own verbal play, she represents women’s condition as it is and creates it anew. Amidst all the schoolgirl autobiography, the one character who does not tell her story in *Mrs. Leicester’s School* is M.B. Though hints of confinement as well as promises of consoling intellectual and social importance loom in her letter of “Dedication” to her schoolgirls at the introduction of this book, it would be in Mary Lamb’s 1815 letter—to the editor of the *British Lady’s Magazine*, which became known as Lamb’s essay “On Needle-work” – that the voice of M.B. would finally be heard.

Notes

(1) Jean Marsden attributes to maternal absence the “incomplete, inadequate, or incorrect learning” across *Mrs. Leicester’s School* (Marsden 33). With the conjoined role of caregiver and educator that Marsden identifies in literature of women’s education in Lamb’s period, inadequate caregiving may be tied to inadequacies in education.

(2) Lamb’s work is an early iteration of an ongoing feminist concern with domestic work mistaken as leisure, the basis of the 1970s Wages for Housework movement. The opening lines of one of the seminal texts of this movement: “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work” (Federici 1).

(3) Jane Aaron discusses this “internal contradiction” in Lamb’s essay as “an attempt to retain her reader’s sympathies” by “shift[ing] from feminist protest to an apparent acceptance of the prevailing social roles then allotted to women. Her writing...avoids the least hint of an authoritarian, dominating voice.” Aaron suggests that Lamb’s “wish to merge...interests with those of the reader conflicts with the need to attack those aspects of the prevailing ideology which, through the implementation of rigid social roles, would limit the potential fluidity and multiplicity of the subject” (Aaron *ADS* 5-6).

(4) Anne Gilchrist suggests that Lamb’s definition of “real work,” as opposed to needlework, is work that “yields a return either of mental or of pecuniary profit” (Gilchrist 244). In Lamb’s descriptions of ideal uses of leisure time are demands for work of this nature.

(5) The critical study of Mary Lamb’s theory of leisure begun by Jane Aaron illuminates the fundamental importance to Lamb of women’s freedom to make choices about their uses of time. Reading “On Needle-work” alongside *Mrs. Leicester’s School*, Aaron discerns the following uses of time as ones Lamb valued for women: time for the intellectual and imaginative enrichment of reading or attending theater, time to observe social mores to perform one’s social role, and time for the therapeutic work of conversation and reflective thought. My work investigates an aspect of women’s uses of time not discussed by Aaron: the potential conflict, as well as harmony, between the desires for time off, for self-fulfillment, and the impetus to care for and benefit others. Aaron emphasizes Lamb’s contrast of needlework to woman’s “own quality of life,” “time they can call their own,” and, in a nod to Virginia Woolf, “an hour of her

own" (Aaron "Positive Leisure" 80). I argue that Lamb was deeply attuned to the ways in which, for women, "her own" time was also always someone else's.

(6) A notable exception is Jean Marsden, who describes this character's limited presence in the text as an instance of the sustained theme of absent mothers. Nevertheless, that discussion emphasizes this character's absence rather than exploring the aspects of her presence.

(7) Charles's September 28th, 1805 letter to Wordsworth, for example, describes Mary's "diffidence" about writing (Lamb *Letters* 2, 176). The girls of *Mrs. Leicester's School* repeatedly describe their uncertainty and even "shame" at having to speak their own stories and have "many objections of not knowing what to say or how to begin" (Lamb *Mrs. Leicester* v). In a letter to Sarah Stoddart on November 9th and 14th, 1805, Mary expresses her anxiety about her expression of anger in a previous letter: "I think it is the last time I will ever let my pen run away with me" (Lamb *Letters* 2, 186).

(8) See Carol Shiner Wilson's reading of "The Young Mahometan" alongside "On Needle-work" regarding Lamb's depiction of deprivation in women's confinement to needlework (Wilson "Lost Needles" 183-86).

(9) Julie Straight suggests that Lamb is deeply attuned to religious prejudice in "The Young Mahometan," making an ostensible critique of Islam reflect back as a critique upon religious intolerance itself.

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