DONNE NELLA STORIA

Riflessi d'inchiostro

3

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Nella storia delle scritture femminili possono a buon diritto acquisire cittadinanza opere di rapida fruizione come pamphlets, conferenze, brevi saggi, racconti che, sebbene non inclusi nei canoni classici, dipingono con colori brillanti l'atmosfera dell'epoca in cui furono redatti. Frequentemente dimenticate, nel lavoro di recupero e divulgazione svolto dagli *women's studies*, tali opere ci permettono di entrare nel vissuto delle scrittrici, illuminano le battaglie politiche, esplorano le intimità più recondite. Lo scopo prioritario della collana « Riflessi d'inchiostro » consiste dunque nel restituire voce e attribuire dignità a sparse *nugae* che, pur esigue, ci parlano ancora attraverso il tempo e lo spazio. A guisa di specchio, le pagine vergate dalle mani delle nostre antenate riflettono nitidamente le loro immagini attraverso la parola femminile troppo a lungo taciuta.

Ogni volume della collana è sottoposto al giudizio di due *blind referees*.

Reflejos de tinta

Con pleno derecho forman parte de la historia de la literatura escrita por mujeres una serie de obras de rápida fruición, como panfletos, conferencias, ensayos breves y relatos que, a pesar de no responder a los cánones clásicos, logran dibujar con brillante colorido la atmósfera de la época en que vieron la luz. A pesar de su olvido y gracias a la labor de recuperación y divulgación de los *women's studies*, estas obras permiten penetrar en la experiencia vivida de la escritoras, iluminar batallas políticas o explorar recónditos interiores. El objeto principal de la colección « Reflejos de tinta » consiste en devolverles la voz y la dignidad a estas dispersas y exiguas nimiedades que, sin embargo, nos hablan a través del tiempo y del espacio. A modo de espejo, estas páginas escritas de puño y letra por nuestras antepasadas tienen la capacidad de reflejar nítidamente su imagen, mediante la palabra de mujer tanto tiempo silenciada.

Cada volumen está sometido al juicio de dos *blind referees*.

Reflexos de tinta

Na história da escrita feminina podem legitimamente adquirir cidadania obras de rápida fruição como panfletos, conferências, breves ensaios, narrativas que, se bem que não incluídos nos cânones clássicos, pintam com cores brilhantes a atmosfera da época na qual foram redigidos. Frequentemente esquecidas, no trabalho de recuperação e divulgação desenvolvido pelos *women's studies*, tais obras permitem–nos entrar nas vivências das escritoras, iluminam batalhas políticas, exploram as intimidades mais recônditas. A finalidade prioritária na coleção « Reflexos de tinta consiste », portanto, no restituir voz e atribuir dignidade a propagadas nugae que, apesar de escassas, nos falam ainda através do tempo e do espaço. Sob a forma de espelho, as páginas escritas pelas mãos das nossas antepassadas refletem nitidamente as imagens delas através da palavra feminina há demasiado tempo omitida.

Cada tomo é submetido à avaliação de dois *blind referees*.

Reflections in Ink

In the history of women's writing, even immediately accessible works such as pamphlets, conferences, short essays have their place, as well as accounts that, despite not being numbered among the literary classics, nevertheless reflect with brilliant colour the atmosphere of the time in which they were produced. Although these works are often neglected in the recovery and divulgation endeavours of scholars of women's studies, they open unique windows into the lives of their authors, illuminating their fiercest political battles and their most intimate secrets. With this in mind, the primary aim of the *Reflections in Ink* series is to confer the appropriate dignity on these occasional "trifles", which, though modest, still speak to us across time and space. Like the clearest of mirrors, the pages inscribed by the hands of our sisters throughout the ages faithfully reflect their images in their own words, which have all too long been ignored.

Each volume is submitted for approval by two blind reviewers.

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Introduzione

Una tragica vicenda personale, una follia matricida, porta il nome di Mary Lamb sulle pagine della cronaca nera londinese. Quel crimine, avvenuto nel Settembre del 1796 all'età di trentuno anni, segnerà per sempre la sua vita e quella del fratello Charles. Da quel momento la biografia dei Lamb diviene una storia di riabilitazione, come sostiene Kathy Watson[1]. Charles ancora ventenne si prenderà cura fino alla sua morte della sorella, ciclicamente affetta da periodiche ricadute. Invece di condannarla alla segregazione o alla punizione per quel violento delitto, con strenue abnegazione cercherà di creare le condizioni per offrirle una vita normale e produttiva. Subito dopo il fatale episodio, nel gennaio del 1797, Charles Lamb in una lettera all'amico S.T. Coleridge confida il suo proposito: «to get her out into the world again, with a prospect of her never being so ill again». A parte i brevi periodi di internamento quando l'instabilità evolve in forme violente e pericolose, Mary condividerà con suo fratello casa, amicizie e vita letteraria. «A double singleness» definirà lo stesso Charles lo straordinario legame a due grazie al quale tenterà di contrastare la malattia di Mary e il ricordo dell'evento funesto intorno al quale aleggerà il silenzio protettivo della famiglia e della cerchia di amici e letterati.

[1] *The Devil Kissed her. The Story of Mary Lamb*, Bloomsbury, London 2004, pp. 1-5.

Strappare le proprie esistenze da una vita solitaria e angustamente familiare è il primo e importante cambio di passo che Charles intravede come beneficio per sé e per Mary. E infatti, alla già consolidata amicizia con Coleridge, cui riferisce in appassionate lettere le speranze e i presupposti di una possibile guarigione per sua sorella, si aggiunge sin dal 1797 quella altrettanto duratura con il poeta Wordsworth e sua sorella Dorothy che Mary ben presto condivide. Di lì a poco i Lamb saranno parte integrante della cerchia avanguardistica londinese di letterati, politici e filosofi animata oltre che da Wordsworth e Coleridge anche da William Godwin, Robert Southey, Leigh Hunt e William Hazlitt.

Dopo dieci anni da quell'episodio di furia omicida causata da una delle ricorrenti crisi di squilibrio mentale che la costringeranno a lunghi periodi di ricovero, Mary Lamb conosce un'intensa stagione letteraria. L'affetto di familiari e amici crea un ritratto idealizzato di lei: è l'amica e la sorella amorevole che ascolta con interesse i dibattiti tra poeti e letterati, è la donna quieta e materna che scrive storie e poesie per bambini. La creatura violenta e irrazionale è come qualcosa di separato da lei. La tragica storia personale, invece, determinata da tare ereditarie, indigenza e affaticamento per le cure prestate alla madre inferma, è ben nota alla gente comune («we are marked» lamenterà Charles), tanto che Mary dovrà pubblicare nell'anonimato la sua breve, ma preziosa, produzione letteraria. In tutto tre opere concepite a quattro mani con suo fratello nell'arco di tre anni. I famosi *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) vanno alle stampe con il solo nome di Charles, benché William Godwin, che aveva intrapreso un'attività da libraio ed editore per ragazzi, avesse proposto a Mary di ridurre in forma di racconto i drammi shakespeariani. Sempre per un

progetto editoriale della *Juvenile's Library* dei Godwin, nel 1808 è pubblicata la raccolta *Mrs. Leicester's School* cui seguirà dopo un anno *Poetry for Children*.

La condivisione di quella esperienza letteraria avrebbe incarnato il principio della *kind assistance* enunciato nella prefazione alla raccolta *Tales from Shakespeare*, vero e proprio manifesto degli affetti e dei legami familiari attraverso i quali i Lamb, ognuno nella riconoscibilità del proprio tratto, leggono i drammi shakespeariani. La moderna lezione pedagogica dei *Tales*, l'apprendimento dell'inestimabile virtù di darsi all'altro, formulata a chiare lettere a conclusione della prefazione, è un omaggio di Mary al custode della sua salute.

> What these Tales have been to you in childhood, that and more it is my wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to you in older years – enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honorable thoughts and actions, to teach you courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.[2]

[2] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *Tales from Shakespeare*, Penguin Classics, London 2007, p. 5.

Capitolo I

Le lettere

La corrispondenza epistolare di Mary Lamb è la diretta testimonianza dell'attiva partecipazione dei due fratelli alla vita culturale e letteraria del primo Ottocento inglese. Dopo la tragica vicenda familiare i Lamb non si eclissano dalla scena sociale e letteraria, al contrario contrastano le sofferenze private e i tormenti psicologici allargando la cerchia delle proprie amicizie e conoscenze. Coleridge, William e Dorothy Wordsworth[1], De Quincey, Godwin, Holcroft, Hazlitt e la futura moglie, Sarah Stoddart, frequentano la casa dei Lamb e animano l'appassionata corrispondenza di Mary. L'omicidio compiuto non offuscherà mai la stima e la rispettabilità intellettuale e morale che conoscenti e amici le tributeranno. Hazlitt ne apprezza l'intelletto di rara eccellenza e Coleridge la annovera tra le migliori amiche considerandola come «a most dear heart's sister».

Le lettere della Lamb sono vera apologia dei legami familiari e di amicizia grazie ai quali nei periodi di sanità può riassaporare i palpiti regolari di una vita ugualmente appagante e serena. Sin dalle prime lettere scritte, tra il 1803 e il 1804, emerge con chiarezza e lucidità il principio ispiratore della sua intima corrispondenza. Invita le due destinatarie privilegiate, Dorothy Wordsworth e Sarah Stoddardt, a riflettere sul valore della corrispondenza come collante di una sincera amicizia e le esorta con piglio programmatico a un intenso e regolare scambio epistola-

[1] Cfr. F. JAMES, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2008.

re: «give me the greatest pleasure». La materialità stessa della carta da lettera diventa emblema di una socievolezza testuale: «My dear Sarah, I have taken a large sheet of paper»[2]. Si rallegra già nel vedere la "grafia" di Sarah e Dorothy non appena giungono le lettere e prova un'insopportabile angoscia ogni qualvolta la posta ritarda.

Quei legami coltivati con devozione diventano fonte primaria di benessere. Il balsamo dell'amicizia cura le ferite private e compensa la freschezza giovanile ormai persa. Nel sollievo salutare e nel piacere estremo della conversazione intima, si sente viva, «a living creature». Solo così può scongiurare la presa minacciosa della malattia che la costringe a una lotta continua e faticosa contro le forze oscure del suo animo e che le fa avvertire l'avvilimento di sentirsi un essere inerte. In una lettera del 1810 confida alla Wordsworth: «It is a great mortification to me to be such an useless creature, and I feel myself greatly indebted to you for the very kind manner in which you take this ungracious matter: but I will say no more on this unpleasant subject»[3]. Preferisce, come più volte ripeterà, non attardarsi sullo spiacevole argomento che è, di fatto, il senso di agonia della perdita della propria identità nei momenti di dissesto mentale. Infatti, non appena torna vittoriosa alla quotidianità, riferisce alle sue interlocutrici solo brevemente e con tocco lieve dell'implacabile corpo a corpo con la malattia e del graduale riaffacciarsi al mondo e alla realtà: «I have been in better health and spirits this week past than since my last illness – I continued so long so very weak & dejected I began to fear I should never be at all comfortable again. I strive against low spirits all I can, but it is a very hard thing to get the better of»[4].

L'isolamento nelle fasi della malattia, che si riaffacciava per diversi mesi quasi ogni anno, per volontà di Charles, quando le

[2] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1976, p. 49.

[3] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume III.1809–1817*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1978, pp. 60-61.

[4] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, cit., p. 117.

espressioni non sono così violente da confinarla nelle *mad–houses*, era per lo più domestico. In quei momenti il fratello le prestava con dedizione le cure dovute e si assumeva talvolta il gravoso incarico di sospendere per alcuni periodi la compagnia degli amici e i regolari incontri del mercoledì che si tenevano nella loro casa. Charles si affannava a regolamentare le visite e i soggiorni degli amici a seconda che la compagnia potesse dare vigore a una Mary indebolita dalla malattia o che, al contrario, potesse aggravarne lo stato di affaticamento. Nell'inverno del 1810 Charles è costretto a fare appello alla comprensione dell'amico Godwin per salvaguardare lo stato di salute della sorella:

> Dear Godwin,
> I have found it for several reasons indispensable to my comfort & to my sister's to have no visitors in the forenoon. If I cannot accomplish this I am determined to leave town. I am extremely sorry to be obliged to do anything in the slightest degree that may seem offensive to you or to Mrs. Godwin, but when a general rule is fixed on, you know how odious in a case of this sort it is to make exceptions […].
> If you were to see the agitation that my sister is in between the fear of offending you & Mrs. Godwin. – and the difficulty of mantaining a system which she feels we must do to live without wretchedness, you would excuse this seeming strange request: which I send with a trembling anxiety as to its reception with you, whom I would never offend. I rely on your goodness.[5]

Non appena Mary Lamb abbandona la prigione della vita interiore è desiderosa di risarcire il suo animo dall'isolamento riconoscendosi nella comunità di conoscenti e amici. Si immerge trionfante nella corrispondenza e sposta l'epicentro autobiografico consueto della scrittura epistolare, rendendosi schiva nel dare espressione alla coscienza privata e ai sentimenti personali. Il racconto della sua vita si confonde con la vita e la storia degli altri e si sviluppa in relazione agli altri. L'io si definisce in forma relazionale, dialogica e collettiva. È voce che rifiuta di into-

[5] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume III.1809–1817*, cit., p. 70.

narsi alla rappresentazione della propria identità nell'isolamento di una scrittura privata, per dare, invece, enfasi alle relazioni personali, alle storie familiari e della comunità composta da amici e conoscenti.

La galleria dei personaggi con cui si relaziona affiora distintamente nelle lettere, come in quella del 9 luglio del 1803, indirizzata a Dorothy Wordsworth. Fitti e solidi sono i legami interpersonali e molteplici le situazioni in cui è coinvolta: la gioia per la nascita di John Wordsworth; la preoccupazione per lo stato di salute di Coleridge; la visita di Southey e gli spettacoli teatrali londinesi in sua compagnia, oltre che con l'amico Rickman e sua sorella; il possibile incarico a Malta di Stoddart e il futuro matrimonio; i ricordi dei giorni trascorsi con i Wordsworth; la cura e la pazienza di Charles che le danno conforto e sostegno nei momento più cupi; i progetti di vacanza; la disavventura finanziaria di Fenwick. Nulla è trascurato nel racconto, persino i piccoli segreti sono utili a comporre i tasselli di una memoria collettiva: «I do not know why I should trouble you with a secret which it seems I am unable to keep myself and which is of no importance to you to hear»[6]. E l'intricata trascrizione di missive che vanno e vengono, come nota incipitaria di diverse lettere, sembra voler annodare la trama delle varie epistole in un'unica narrazione in cui ogni storia personale mostra i legami di filiazione alla famiglia e alla comunità.

La corrispondenza di Mary Lamb è chiaramente imbevuta dell'entusiasmo culturale per il sentimento dell'amicizia condiviso da gran parte dei poeti e degli scrittori del periodo Romantico e considerato come espressione di un idealismo simpatetico che informa i legami di amicizia. Il principio ispiratore di reciproca partecipazione che anima gli scambi epistolari la rende, al tempo stesso, l'amica bisognosa e l'ascoltatrice simpatetica che condivide con sincero affetto gioie e sofferenze altrui.

[6] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, cit., p. 118.

Nei momenti di sanità, ritornata al consueto temperamento pacato e allo spirito gioioso e sereno, diventa la saggia consigliera per gli amici in difficoltà. È consapevole di avere il dono prezioso dell'«advising spirit» e molte delle lettere a Sarah Stoddard sono improntate alla retorica dei "consigli alla giovane amica" e incentrate prevalentemente sugli affetti della vita familiare o sulle questioni sentimentali. In quelle pagine non c'è traccia delle inquiete turbolenze del suo animo. Guida e consiglia con acume e lucidità. Trae, per sua stessa ammissione, la capacità di giudizio dal saper leggere correttamente nell'animo delle persone vicine e dal saper riconosce le affinità d'animo e di sensibilità che alimentano i legami profondi tra gli individui. Infatti, vanta «a knack […] of looking into people's real character». Dispensa a Sarah preziosi consigli in modo che possa scoprire in sé la disposizione naturale al vivere sociale che nell'epistolario si impone come vera virtù privata. Affinché la sua giovane amica si educhi e coltivi tale principio, la invita a fortificare il rapporto con la propria cognata. Dopo un attento studio del suo carattere, è certa che Sarah possa stabilire con lei un rapporto autentico ed eleggerla a sua amica. Nella lettera del 21 settembre del 1803 Mary illustra con un esempio concreto come la frequentazione e il dialogo possano correggere la fallacia delle prime impressioni nella giusta conoscenza dell'altro. La trasmissione di quella esperienza sembra vera sintesi della faticosa acquisizione conoscitiva delle eroine austeniane.

> One thing my advising spirit must say – use as little *Secresy* as possible, and as much as possible make a friend of your sister–in–law – you know I was not struck with her at first sight, but upon your account, I have watch and marked her very attentively: and while she was eating a bit of cold mutton in our kitchen, we had a serious conversation, from the frankness of her manner I am convinced she is a person I could make a friend of, why should not you? We talk freely about you: she seems to have a just notion of your character, and will be fond of you, if you will let her.[7]

[7] Ivi, p. 123.

Sempre avvalendosi di esempi di vita concreta – «I speak from my experience» ama sottolineare – mostra alla sua amica i risvolti spiacevoli derivanti dalla poca franchezza e dall'incapacità di comprendere il carattere dell'altro. Dalle memorie dell'infanzia elabora «the secret history […] of all sisters–in–law». La storia ruota attorno all'impeccabile ritratto della madre che Mary Lamb tratteggia nei propri scritti («my Mother was a perfect gentlewoman») e al difficile e travagliato rapporto con la cognata («they were in their different ways the best creatures in the world»). Vani i tentativi della madre di contrastare l'infondato odio della cognata, inutili l'attenzione, la gentilezza e l'affetto profusi, creduti inganni: «a little frankness and looking into each other characters at first would have spared all this, and they would have lived as they died fond of each other, for the last few years of their life when we grew up & harmonised them a little they sincerely loved each other»[8].

Le intime conversazioni, l'aprirsi all'altro superando il muro della «secrecy», sono terreno fertile per costruire ciò che la Lamb con accezione ampia ama definire *friendship*. L'indissolubile rapporto a due che Mary condivide con Charles, e che commuoveva e suscitava ammirazione nello stesso Coleridge, è il modello ideale da trasmettere a Sarah. È chiara la formula, ed anche il fascino, di tale intimità: «the free communication of letters and opinions, just as they arise, as Charles and I do, and which is, after all, the only groundwork of friendship»[9]. Nulla resta confinato nell'ambito del proprio pensiero e del proprio animo, nulla resta nel non detto della *secrecy* che minaccia di costruire mondi di solitudine e di incomunicabilità. Mary Lamb ha scoperto la cura nel dire "noi", il bisogno e il valore delle relazioni che legano l'io autobiografico a una comunità o a persone significative, l'importanza di anteporre la comunità all'individuo: «*Secrecy*, though you appear all frankness, is certainly a grand failing of yours, it is likewise your *brothers* and therefore a family failing – by secrecy I mean you both

[8] Ivi, p. 124.
[9] *Ibidem*

want the habit of telling each other at the moment everything that happens, – where you go – and what you do.» [10]

Riflessioni, notizie, accadimenti della realtà quotidiana rivivono nel confronto continuo con la presenza amica. L'abitudine a raccontare e il desiderio di condividere tutto ciò che accade nel momento in cui si verifica conquistano la confidenza e l'affetto della persona vicina. Confermando l'indagine sui grandi sentimenti condotta nel periodo Romantico, anche l'amicizia non può sorgere immediatamente e "a prima vista". È necessario ampliare e approfondire la conoscenza dell'altro. E l'attaccamento segue alla scoperta della sua benevolenza e della sua compatibilità. Una buona pratica, consiglia Mary a Sarah, per cementare la nascente amicizia con stima e affetto reciproco, è discutere con l'altro di una lettera appena ricevuta. Suggerisce di mostrare quella che ora sta redigendo, espressione di franchezza e sincerità («that it is written freely and loosely»). La perentoria dichiarazione, «I must write freely or not at all», suona come manifesto di un radicale ideale di amicizia. Le lettere non sono forme transitorie ed effimere di comunicazione. Educano al sentimento e radicano l'individuo nel gruppo e nella collettività.

Il *corpus* epistolare della Lamb rappresenta un contributo significativo alla cultura e la pratica della auto-narrazione, un diverso modello di *authorship* disponibile per le donne che supera la consueta prospettiva autobiografica legata alla confessione o all'interiorità[11]. Il profilo di scrittrice e la costruzione dell'identità femminile, niente affatto oppressa o repressa, traggono forza dal costituirsi parte integrante di una comunità, dal poter avvalersi di un'identificazione culturale e personale.

Le lettere a Sarah Stoddart sono formulate con il linguaggio idoneo alla piena confidenza e, a sua volta, Mary è appagata dalla comunicazione schietta e franca della corrispondente («I thank you for your frank communication, & I beg you will con-

[10] *Ibidem*

[11] Cfr. M.A. FAVRET, *Romantic Correspondences. Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp.12-15.

tinue it in future»[12]), che equivale a definirla una "vera amica" che ama con sincerità. E, infatti, l'intima amicizia con la Stoddart sarà duratura. Sarah incarna il ritratto esemplificativo dell'amica ideale e Mary si sente gratificata dall'essere compagna e confidente di colei che è ammirata con ardore. Le lettere di Sarah sono «the kindest, best, most natural ones I ever received», alle quali è possibile attribuire il *degree* romantico dell'eccellenza, specie a quella in cui si riferisce dell'arrivo di Coleridge a Malta. Proverbiale era l'incostanza del grande poeta nel trasmettere notizie di sé ad amici e parenti. Pertanto, preziosi sono gli aggiornamenti che Sarah, residente in quel momento nell'isola per via dell'incarico del fratello, invierà alla Lamb, che a sua volta trasmetterà alla famiglia Coleridge e ai fratelli Wordworth:

> The one containing the account of the arrival of Coleridge, perhaps the best I ever saw, & your old friend Charles is of my opinion. We sent it off to Mrs Coleridge, & the Wordsworths, as well because we thought it our duty to give them the first notice we had of our dear friend safety, as that we are proud of shewing our Sarah pretty letter.[13]

Gran parte della corrispondenza è indirizzata, per l'appunto, a Sarah Stoddart senza la quale Mary sarebbe stata una figure silente, una presenza invece di una voce. Gli scambi epistolari tra Mary e Sarah, oltre a essere limpida testimonianza del significato culturale dell'amicizia in quel periodo, e delle trasformazioni dell'amicizia femminile in particolare, ridefiniscono i ruoli di genere nella famiglia e nella società. Spesso le due amiche confrontano i propri rapporti con i fratelli o le madri offrendo una prospettiva femminile privilegiata sulle relazioni personali e familiari. Mary ritrae sé e Sarah come individui autonomi, talvolta idealizzati. Ironici e lucidi sono i consigli all'amica negli affari di cuore, disincantati o sofferti quelli sulla vita matrimoniale, specie quando è chiamata a esprimere conforto e solida-

[12] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, cit., p. 141.
[13] *Ibidem*

rietà per il dolore della perdita patito dagli amici per i propri figli: «I am glad I am an old maid, for you see there is nothing but misfortunes in the marriage state»[14].

Dal dialogo con la corrispondente Sarah emerge una riconsiderazione dell'identità femminile. Mary Lamb tratteggia con toni più o meno sfumati forme moderne di protagonismo e individualismo femminili che possano realizzarsi al di fuori dei ruoli ereditati e convenzionali. Più volte esorta Sarah a non cedere al matrimonio, ma a programmare una vita a Londra, con lei e Charles. L'aggravarsi delle condizioni di salute della madre ben presto sottrarrà Sarah al ruolo di figlia. L'idea di una vita a tre suona come un vagheggiamento di una comunità immaginaria e anche disegna nuovi orizzonti nella vita delle donne, contravvenendo alla consueta ritrattistica femminile del tempo che equiparava la donna senza matrimonio e famiglia a un'orfana priva di una identità sociale.

I Lamb furono anche a stretto contatto con Godwin e Holcroft, fermi sostenitori che i legami simpatetici nelle relazioni umane potessero avere effetti più ampi nei cambiamenti sociali. Holcroft concludeva il romanzo *Hugh Trevor* con la visione di una età dell'oro dell'amicizia maschile e Godwin fissava tale ideale nei suoi scritti teorici, benché rifiutasse l'idealizzazione romantica di una amicizia tutta maschile. Nel saggio *Of Love and Friendship* Godwin affronta direttamente la questione dell'amicizia e del suo potenziale politico.

I Lamb conoscevano bene quali risultati avesse prodotto la storia della leggendaria amicizia tra Wordsworth e Coleridge e come nell'euforia della scoperta reciproca i due giovani idealisti avessero dato vita al Movimento Romantico in Inghilterra. Coleridge, in particolare, si colloca in un dibattito culturale più ampio sull'amicizia che si sviluppa tra gli anni '80 e '90 del Settecento e che coinvolge gli aspetti "trascendenti" e "empiristi" delle relazioni umane[15]. Per Coleridge, l'amicizia resta lo

[14] Ivi, p. 49.

[15] G. TAUSSING, *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789–1804*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 2002, pp. 50–52.

spirito divino dell'amore che anima l'universo, è espressione di un'Idea più elevata rispetto al mondo materiale della natura.

Anche nell'epistolario della Lamb le situazioni quotidiane – gli amici che fanno due passi serali o si trattengono in una chiacchierata – rivivono nel mondo duraturo del sentimento e del ricordo. Solo pochi anni dopo la grande tragedia, le lettere di Mary testimoniano la sua iniziazione in un ordine superiore che possa sottrarla al mondo impuro dell'esperienza per abbracciare l'appassionata vita dell'amicizia.

In termini domestici Mary Lamb ritrae un grande modello di comunità idilliaca fatta di affetti e amore, di perfetti legami tra amici e di influenza morale reciproca. L'amicizia, la più affidabile delle relazioni, è presentata come equivalente ai legami familiari in termini di lealtà e dedizione. Mary vive circondata dalla benevolenza dei suoi amici. Con dovizia riferisce delle ore che trascorre con beneficio e diletto in loro compagnia. Prende nota degli incontri e dei visitatori. Le lettere, infatti, risentono della modalità orale delle conversazioni, degli aneddoti, dei pettegolezzi e dei racconti. Tra lo scrivere e il trascrivere, Mary Lamb modula la propria espressione epistolare come estensione degli incontri e delle relazioni personali con il deliberato intento di creare un modello sociale di vita e di scrittura.

Infatti, ben visibile è il contesto sociale della produzione letteraria del periodo. Emerge un considerevole numero di progetti collettivi e di collaborazioni che delegittima il culto del genio isolato nel periodo romantico. Invece, la *authorship* collettiva e familiare (come dimostra la stessa biografia dei Lamb) quasi si impone come momento di formazione culturale molto influente rispetto a quello di figure isolate. E le lettere della Lamb offrono una maggiore comprensione di tale tradizione letteraria e del senso di una collaborazione in termini di assistenza, ispirazione, influenza reciproca, incitamento e revisione. La stessa Mary nei momenti di avvilimento creativo incita la stessa Sarah ad assurgere a fonte di ispirazione. Vorrebbe che fosse suo sostegno letterario al pari della condivisione letteraria familiare che vige tra i due fratelli.

Calorosi sono anche i ricordi degli amici letterati, colti nei loro vezzi e nelle esigenze delle quotidianità. Ne esalta le doti, i talenti e le qualità individuali del cuore e della mente. Charles, infatti, apprezza di Mary la capacità di ricordare ed evocare: «her pouring out memories of all events and persons of her younger days».

Spesso sono ricordati i giorni trascorsi a Grasmere. La calorosa ospitalità di Dorothy e Williams Wordsworth e il fascino dei magnifici scenari del Lake District si confondono idealmente nelle sue memorie, tanto da trasformare sovente l'esperienza vissuta in desiderio. A Dorothy, la corrispondente "distante", riferisce: «How pleasant your little house and orchard must be now. I almost wish I had never seen it. I am always wishing to be with you. I could sit upon that little bench in idleness day long»[16].

Sempre sotto la spinta della distanza geografica, chiede a Sarah mentre è a Malta «to say a great deal about [herself]». Le richiede «every thing pleasant, and every thing unpleasant, that befalls you». Enuncia con chiarezza i principi dei legami reciproci dell'amicizia confessionale e sentimentale e dei rapporti simpatetici. Infatti, si rallegra della prosperità degli altri e si rammarica delle loro sventure. Se la partecipazione compassionevole è la qualità essenziale delle relazioni idealizzate, dopo la morte di suo fratello, Dorothy riceve proprio dai Lambs la lettera più consolatoria. In quelle particolari occasioni, la Lamb cerca stati di estrema elevazione mentale, poiché i momenti delicati di confidenza e compassione vanno oltre la semplice consolazione tra amici. Riferisce a Dorothy la fatica della scrittura nella ricerca di un adeguata espressione di cordoglio. Avvilita ella stessa da quel dolore, ne è incapace. Si limita, pertanto, a elencare e trascrive i tentativi falliti e a riformulare gli assunti wordsworthiani sull'azione benefica del tempo e del ricordo. Ogni tentativo di alleviare il dolore con la parola appare «improper» rispetto alla portata di quell'evento luttuoso. La vita emozionale

[16] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, cit., p. 117.

e i sentimenti profondi non sono mai rappresentati in termini effusivi. Secondo l'influente lezione della prefazione alle *Lyrical Ballads*, nel momento in cui apre il suo cuore agli altri, Mary resiste ed evita di dar sfogo al suo animo con fervore.

> My dear Miss Wordsworth
> I thank you my kind friend for your most comfortable letter, till I saw your own hand-writing I could not persuade myself that i should do well to write to you, though I have often attempted it, but I always left off dissatisied with what I had written, & feeling that I was doing an improper thing to intrude upon sorrow […].
> I send you some poor lines which I wrote under this conviction of mind […] I will transcribe them now before I finish my letter, lest a false shame prevent me then, for I know they are much worse than they ought to be, written as they were with strong feeling and on such a subject, every line seems to me to be borrowed, but I had no better way of expressing my thoughts, and I never have the power of altering or amending anything I have once laid aside with dissatisfaction.[17]

Non è incongrua una lettera che coinvolge Dorothy nel pieno della sofferenza a riflettere sull'espressione e il senso del dolore. È la Wordsworth la destinataria con cui confrontarsi sui temi più dolorosi della vita. Riferisce della sua malattia, dei sacrifici dell'indigenza familiare, perché è certa della piena comprensione e del sostegno reciproco.

Nonostante la forza morale e l'abnegazione nel prendersi cura della sorella per tutta la vita, Charles idealizza nelle sue lettere Mary come un essere dalla natura superiore, mai in contrasto con i ricorrenti squilibri mentali o col terrore che ha segnato le loro vite. Proprio nella lettera a Coleridge in cui riferisce dell'omicidio, sono, infatti, esaltate la semplicità virtuosa di un carattere privo di egoismo e la qualità superlativa della sua mente nel tentativo di canonizzare la sorella attribuendole un'eccellenza caratteriale indiscussa, che negli anni a venire non offuscherà mai il suo sacrificio personale. A Charles Lamb, di fatto, è attribuibile il primo tentativo di far conoscere al pubblico l'altro lato della natura di Mary Lamb. Intanto la devozio-

[17] Ivi, p. 166.

ne estrema verso la famiglia e il fratello stesso, la partecipazione alla vita sociale e culturale del tempo, il sincero interesse e la sollecitudine per gli amici, le doti letterarie che con fatica nel tempo hanno ottenuto la riconoscenza dovuta. Nella corrispondenza il suo carattere si mostra nel suo fascino sfumato: l'originalità e sincerità dei consigli profusi, l'entusiasmo e la partecipazione di uno spirito vivace, le riflessioni acute e talvolta audacemente proto-femministe, lo stile limpido, semplice, ma con un senso profondo nella forza delle parole.

Mary Lamb costruisce nella sua corrispondenza l'idea e la possibilità di un reame delle interazioni umane e letterarie privato e incontaminato, una specie di utopia sociale tradotta nel linguaggio umano della vita di ogni giorno.

The Letters

I.

July 9, 1803

My dear Miss Wordsworth

We rejoice with exceeding great joy to hear the delightful tidings you were so *very* kind to remember to send us—I hope your dear sister is perfectly well, and makes an excellent nurse—are you not now the happiest family in the world.

I have been in better health and spirits this week past than since my last illness—I continued so long so very weak & dejected I began to fear I should never be at all comfortable again, I strive against low spirits all I can, but it is a very hard thing to get the better of.

I am very uneasy about poor Coleridge, his last letters are very melancholy ones, remember me affectionately to him & Sara, I hope you often see him—

Southey is in town, he seems as proud of his little girl as I suppose your brother is of his boy, he says his home is now quite a different place to what it used to be—I was glad to hear him say this—it used to look rather chearless.

We went last week with Southey & Rickman & his sister to

Sadlers Wells, the lowest and most London–like of all our London amusements —the entertainments were Goody Two Shoes, Jack the Giant–Killer, and *Mary of Buttermere!* poor Mary was very happily married at the end of the piece, to a sailor her former sweetheart—we had a prodigious fine veiw of her fathers house in the vale of Buttermere—mountains very like large haycocks, and a lake like nothing at all: if you had been with us, would you have laughed the whole time like Charles & Miss Rickman or gone to sleep as Southey and Rickman did.

Stoddart is in expectation of going soon to Malta as Judges Advocate, it is likely to be a profitable situation, fifteen hundred a year or more—if he goes he takes with him his sister and as I hear from her as a very great secret a *wife*;[4] you must not mention this because if he stays in England he may not be rich enough to marry for some years, I do not know why I trouble you with a secret which it seems I am unable to keep myself and which is of no importance to you to hear; if he succeeds in this appointment he will be in a great bustle for he must set out to Malta in a month, in the mean time he must go to Scotland to marry & fetch his wife and it is a match against her parents consent and they as yet know nothing of the Malta expedition; so that he expects many difficulties, but the young lady and he are determined to conquer them, he then must go to Salisbury to take leave of his father & mother who I pity very much, for they are old people and therefore are not very likely ever to see their children again.

Charles is very well and very *good* I mean very sober but he is very good in every sense of the word for he has been very kind and patient with me and I have been a sad trouble to him lately, he had shut out all his friends because he thought company hurt me, and done every thing in his power to comfort & amuse me, we are to go out of town soon[5] for a few weeks when I hope I shall get quite stout and lively.

You saw Fenwick when you was with us, perhaps you remember his wife and children were with his brother a tradesman at Penzance, he (the brother) who was supposed to be in a great way of business has become a bankrupt, they are now at Pen-

zance without a home & without money; and poor Fenwick who has been Editor of a country newspaper lately is likely soon to be quite out of employ; I am distresed for them for I have a great affection for Mrs Fenwick.

how pleasant your little house and orchard must be now, I almost wish I had never seen it, I am always wishing to be with you, I could sit upon that little bench in idleness [all] day long. When you have a leisure hour, a letter from y[ou,] kind friend will give me the greatest pleasure—

We have money of yours and I want you to send me so[me] commission to lay it out are you not in want of anything.

I believe when we go out of town it will be to Margate—I love the seaside and expect much benefit from it, but your mountain scenery has spoiled us we shall find the fiat country of the Isle of Thanet very dull.—

Charles joins me in love to your brother & sister and the little John, I hope you are building more rooms, Charles said I was so long answering your letter Mrs Wordsworth would have another little one before you received it. our love and compliments to our kind Molly, I hope she grows younger & happier every day—when, and where, shall I ever see you again, not I fear a very long time, you are too happy ever to wish to come to London—when you write tel me how poor Mrs Clarkson does.

God bless you & yours

I am your affezionate friend
M Lamb

II.

September 21, 1803

My dear Sarah

I returned home from my visit yesterday, and was much pleased to find your letter, for I have been very anxious to hear how you were going on.—I could hardly help expecting to see you when I came in: yet though I should have rejoiced to have seen your merry face again, I believe it was better as it was—upon the whole, and all things considered, it is certainly better

you should go to Malta.

The terms you are upon with your Lover does (as you say it will) appear wondrous strange to me, however, as I cannot enter into your feelings, I certainly can have nothing to say to it, only th[a]t I sincerely wish you happy in your own way, however odd that way may appear to me to be. I would begin now to advise you to drop all correspondence with William but, as I said before, as I cannot enter into your feelings, and views of things, *your ways not being my ways,* why should I tell you what I would do in your situation. So child take thy own ways and God prosper thee in them.

One thing my advising spirit must say—use as little *Secresy* as possible, and as much as possible make a friend of your sister–in–law. You know I was not struck with her at first sight, but upon your account, I have watched and marked her very attentively: and while she was eating a bit of cold mutton in our kitchen, we had a serious conversation, from the frankness of her manner I am convinced she is a person I could make a friend of, why should not you? We talked freely about you: she seems to have a just notion of your character, and will be fond of you, if you will let her.

My father had a sister lived with us, of course lived with my Mother her sister–in–law, they were in their different ways the best creatures in the world—but they set out wrong at first. They made each other miserable for full twenty years of their lives—my Mother was a perfect gentlewoman, my Aunty as unlike a gentlewoman as you can possibly imagine a good old woman to be, so that my dear Mother (who though you do not know it, is always in my poor head and heart) used to distress and weary her with incessant & unceasing attentions, and politeness to gain her affection, The Old woman could not return this in kind, and did not know what to make of it—thought it all deceit, and used to hate my Mother with a bitter hatred, which of which of course was soon retumed with interest, a little frankness and looking into each others characters at first would have spared all this, and they would have lived as they died fond of each other, for the last few years of their life when we grew

up & harmonised them a little they sincerely loved each other. My Aunt & my Mother were wholly unlike you and your sister, yet in some degree theirs is the secret history I believe of all sisters–in–law—and you will smile when I tell you I think myself the only woman in the world, who could live with a brothers wife, and make a real friend of her. partly from early observation of the unhappy example I have just given you, and partly from a knack I know I have of looking into peoples real characters, and never expecting them to act out of it—never expecting another to do as I would do in the same case. When you leave your Mother and say if you never shall see her again you shall feel no remorse, and when you make a *jewish* bargain with your *Lover,* all this gives me no offence, because it is your nature, and your temper, and I do not expect or want you to be otherwise than you are, I love you for the good that is in you, and look for no change.

But, certainly you ought to struggle with the evil that does most easily beset you—a total want of politeness in behaviour, I would say modesty of behaviour, but that I should not convey to you my idea of the word modesty, for I certainly do not mean you want *real modesty,* and what is usually called false, [o]r mock modesty, is [a qua]llity I certainly do not wish you to possess; yet I trust you know what I mean well enough.

Secresy, though you appear all frankness, is certainly a grand failing of yours, it is likewise your *brothers* and therefore a family failing— by secrecy I mean you both want the habit of telling each other at the moment everything that happens,—where you go—and what you do—that free communication of lettere and opinions, just as they arise, as Charles and I do, and which is after all the only groundwork of any friendship—your brother I will answer fo[r…] will ne ver tell his wife or his sister all tha[t is in] his mind—he will receive letters and not s[…] this is a fault Mrs Stoddart can never te[ll him] of, but she can, and will feel it, thoug[h on] the whole and in [ever]y other respect she i[s…] happy with him.— Begin for Gods sake a[t the] first and tell her every thing that passes—at first she may hear you with indifference, but in time this will gain her affec-

tion and confidence.— Show her all you[r] letters (no matter if she does not show hers). It is a pleasant thing for a friend to put into ones hand a letter just fresh from the post. I would even say begin with shewing her this, but that it is written freely and loosely, and some apology ought to be made for it, which I know not how to make, for I must write freely or not at all.

If you do this, she will tell your brother you will say, and what then quotha'?—it will beget a freer communication amongst you, which is a thing devoutly to be wished.

God bless you, and grant you may preserve your integrity, and return unmarried and penniless, and make William a good and a happy wife

your affectionate friend
M Lamb

Charles is very unwell, & my head aches, he sends his love, mine with my best wishes to your brother & sister.

I hope I shall get another letter from you.

III.

Mid–June 1804

My dearest Sarah

Your letter which contained the news of Coleridge's arrival was a most welcome one, for we had began to entertain very unpleasant apprehensions for his safety. And your kind reception of the forlom wanderer gave me the greatest pleasure, & I thank you for it in my own, & my brothers name. I shall depend upon you for hearing of his welfare, for he does not write himself: but as long as we know he is safe, and in such kind friends hands, we do not mind. Your letterrs my dear Sarah are to me very, very precious ones, they are the kindest, best, most natural ones I ever received. The one containing the account of the arrival of Coleridge, perhaps the best I ever saw, & your old friend Charles is of my opinion. We sent it off to Mrs Coleridge, & the Wordsworths, as well because we thought it our duty to give them the first notice we had of our dear friends safety, as that we were proud of shewing our Sarahs pretty letter. The letters

we received a few days after from you, & your brother were far less welcome ones, I rejoiced to hear your sister is well, but I grieved for her loss of the dear baby. And I am sorry to find your brother is not so successful as he at firet expected to be, and yet I am almost tempted to wish his illfortune may send him over to us again, he has a friend I understand who is now at the head of the Admiralty. Why may he not return & make a fortune here?

I cannot condole with you very sincerely upon your little failure in the fortune–making–way. If you regret it. So do I. But I hope to see you a comfortable English Wife, & the forsaken, forgotten William of English–Partridge memory, I have still a hankering after. However I thank you for your frank communication, & I beg you will continue it in future, & if I do not agree with a good grace to your having a Maltese husband, I will wish you happy, provided you make it a part of your marriage articles, that your husband shall allow you to come over-sea & make me one visit, else may neglect, & overlookedness be your portion while [y]ou stay there.

I would condole with you upon the misfortune has befallen your poor leg, but such is the blessed distance we are at from each other, that I hope before you receiv[e] this you have forgot it ever happened.

Are complimelits the high ton at the Maltese Court, your brother is so profuse of them to me, that being as you know so unused to them, they perplex me sadly, [i]n future I beg they may be discontinued. They always remind me of the free, & I believe very improper letter I wrote to you whlie you were at the Isle of Wight, the more kindly you & your brother & sister took the impertinent advice contain[e]d in it, the more certain I feel that it was unnecessary, & therefore highly improper. Do not let your brother compliment me into the memory of it again.

My brother has had a letter from your Mother which has distressed him sadly about the postage of some letters being paid by my brother. your silly brother it [s]eems has informed your Mother (I did not think your brother could have been so silly) that Charles had grumbled at paying the said postage. The fact

was, just at that time we were very poor, having lost the Morning Post, & we were begining to practice a strict economy. My brother who never makes up his mind whether he will be a Miser, or a Spendthrift, is at all times a strange mixture of both, of this failing the even economy of your correct brother's temper makes him an ill judge. The miserly part of Charles, at that time smarting [u]nder his recent loss, then happened to reign triumphant, and he would not write, or let me write, so often as he wished, because the postage cost two and four pence, then came two or three of your poor Mother's letters nearly together, & the two & four pences he wished, but grudged to pay for his own, [h]e was forced to pay for hers. In this dismal distress he applied to Fenwick [t]o get his friend Motley to send them free from Portsmouth, this Mr Fenwick could have done for half a words speaking, but this he did not do! Then Charles foolishly, & unthinkingly complained to your brother in a half serious, half joking way, & your brother has wickedly, & with malice aforethought told your Mother, O fye upon him, what will your Mother think of us. I too feel my share of blame in this vexatious business, for I saw the unlucky paragraph in my brothers' letter, & I had a kind of foreboding that it would come to your Mothers' ears although I had a higher notion of your brothers good sense than I find he de served. By entreaties & prayers I might have prevailed on my brother to say nothing about it. But I make a point of conscience never to interfere, or cross my brother in the humour he happens to be in. It always seems to me to be a vexatious kind of Tyranny that women have no business to exercise over men, which merely because *they having a better judgement* they have the power to do. Let *men* alone, and at last we find they come round to the right way, which *we* by a kind of intuition perceive at once. But better, far better, that *we* should let them often do wrong, than that they should have the torment of [a] Monitor always at their elbows. Charles is sadly fretted now, & knows not what to say to your Mother—. I have made this long preamble about it, to induce you if possible to reinstate us in your Mothers good graces, say to her it was a jest misunderstood, tell her Charles Lamb is not the shabby fellow

she & her son took him for, but that he is now & then a little whimsical, or so. I do not ask your brother to do this, for I am offended with him for the mischief he has made.

I feel that I have too lightly passed over the interresting account you sent me of your late disappointment. It was not because I did not feel & comple[te]ly enter into the affair with you. You surprize & please me with the frank & generous way in which you deal with your Lovers, taking a refusal from their cold prudential hearts, with a better grace, & more good humour than other women accept a suitors Service.— Continue this open artless conduct & I trust you will at last find some man who has sense enough to know you are well worth risking a probable life of poverty for.

I shall yet live to see you, a poor, but happy English Wife. Remember me most affectionately to Coleridge—, & I thank you again, & again for all your kindness to him. To dear Mrs Stoddart & your brother I beg my bes[t] love, and to you all I wish health & happiness, & a *soon* return to Old England

I have sent to Mr Burrels for your kind present, but unfortunately he is not in town. I am impatient to see my fine silk handkerchiefs, & I thank [y]ou for them, not as a present, for I do not love presents, but [as a … remembrance of your old] friend. Farewell

I am my best Sarah,
your most affectionate friend
Mary Lamb

IV.

May 7, 1805

My dear Miss Wordsworth

I thank you my kind friend for your most comfortable letter, till I saw your own hand–writing I could not persuade myself that I should do well to write to you, though I have often attempted it, but I always left off dissatisfied with what I had written, & feeling that I was doing an improper thing to intrude upon your sorrow, I wished to tell you, that you would one day feel

the kind of peaceful state of mind, and sweet memory of the dead which you so happily describe as now almost begun, but I felt that it was improper, and most grating to the feelings of the aflicted, to say to them that the memory of their aff[l]iction would in time become a Constant part not only of their "dream, but of their most wakeful sense of happiness." That you would see every object with, & through your lost brother, & that that would at last become a real & everlasting source of comfort to you, I felt, & well knew from my own experience in sorrow, but till you yourself began to feel this I did not dare tell you so, but I send you some poor lines which I wrote under this conviction of mind, and before I heard Coleridge was returning home. I will transcribe them now before I finish my letter, lest a false shame prevent me then, for I know they are much worse than they ought to be, written as they were with strong feeling and on such a subject, every line seems to me to be borrowed, but I had no better way of expressing my thoughts, and I never have the power of altering or amending anything I have once laid aside with dissatisfaction.

Why is he wandering o'er the sea?
Coleridge should now with Wordsworth be.
By slow degrees he'd steal away Their woe, and gently bring a ray (So happily he'd time relief)
Of comfort from their very grief.
He'd tell them that their brother dead
When years have passed o'er their head,
Will be remember'd with such holy,
True, & perfect melancholy,
That ever this lost brother John
Will be their hearts companion.
His voice they'll always hear, his face they'll always see,
There's nought in life so sweet as such a memory.

Mr and Mrs Clarkson came to see us last week, I find it was at your request they sought us out, you cannot think how glad we were to see them, so little as we have ever seen of them, yet

they seem to us like very old friends. poor Mrs. Clarkson looks very ill indeed, she walked near a mile, and came up our high stairs which fatigued her very much, but when she had sat a while her-own natural countenance with which she cheared us in your little cottage seemed to return to her, & then I began to have hopes she would get the better of her complaint. Charles does not think she is so much altered as I do I wish he may be the better judge. We talked of nothing but you, she means to try to get leave of Dr Beddoes to come & see you—her heart is with you, & I do not think it would hurt her so much to come to you, as it would distress you to see her so ill.

She read me a part of your letter wherein you so kindly express your wishes that we would come & see you this summer. I wish we could for I am sure it would be a blessed thing for you, & for us to be a few weeks together—I fear it must not be.— Mrs Clarkson is to be in town again in a fortnight and then they have promised we shall see more of them.

I am very sorry for the poor little Dorothy's illness—I hope soon to hear she is perfectly recovered. Remember me with affection to your brother, & your good sister, what a providence it is that your brother & you have this kind friend, & these dear little ones—I rejoice with her & with you that your brother is employed upon his poem again—

pray remember us to old Molly, Mrs Clarkson says her house is a pattern of Neatness, to all her neighbours—such good ways she learnt of "Mistress." how well I remember the shining ornaments of her kitchen, & her old friendly face not t[he] least ornamentai part of it.

Excuse the hast I write in, I am unexpectedly to go out to dinner, else I think I have much more to say, but I will not put it off till next post, because you so kindly say I must not write if I feel unwilling— you do not know what very great joy I have in being again writing to you,

Thank you for sending the letter of Mr Evans, it was a very kind one, have you received one from a Comet Burgoine, my brother wrote to him & desires he would direct his answer to your brother.— God bless you & yours my dear friend

I am yours affectionately
M Lamb

V.

February 20, 1806

My dear Sarah

I am going to make a sort of a promise to myself and to you, that I will write you kind of journal-like letters, of the daily what-we-do- matters, as they occur. This day seems to me a kind of new aera in our time, it is not a birthday, nor a new–years–day, nor a leave–off–smoking–day; but it is about an hour after the time of leaving you our poor Phoenix, in the Salisbury Stage, and Charles has just left me for the first time alone to go to his lodging, and I am holding a solitary consultation with myself, as to the how I shall employ myself. Writing plays, novels, poems, and all manner of such–like vapouring and vapourish schemes are floating in my head, which at the same time aches with the thoughts of parting from you, and is perplext with the idea of I cannot tell what about notion that I have not made you half so comfortable as I ought to have done, and a melancholy sense of the dull prospect you have before you on your return home—then I think I will make my new gown, & now I consider the white peticoat will be better candle–light work, and then I look at the fire and think if the irons was but down I would iron my Gowns, you having put me out of conceit of mangling. So much for an account of my own confused head, and now for yours, returning home from the Inn we took that to pieces, and ca[n]vassed you as you know is our usual custom—we agreed we should miss you sadly, and that you had been, what you yourself discovered, *not at all in our way,* and although if the Post Master, should happen to open this, it would appear to him to be no great compliment, yet you who enter so warmly into the interior of our affairs will understand and value it, as well as what we likewise asserted, that since you have been with us, you have done but one foolish thing, *vide* Pinkhom. (excuse my bad latin if it should chance to

mean exactly contrary to what I intend.) We praised you for the very friendly way in which you regarded all our whimsies, & to use a phrase of Coleridge's, *understood us.* We had in short no drawback in our eulogy on your merit, except lamenting the want of respect you have to yourself—the want of a certain dignity of action you know what I mean, which though it only broke out in the acceptance of the old Justice's book, and was as it were smothered, & almost extinct while you were here, yet is it so native a feeling in your mind that you will do whatever the present moment prompts you to do, that I wish you would take that one slight offence seriously to heart, and make it a part of your daily consideration to drive this unlucky propensity, root, and branch, out of your character.— Then, Mercy on us, what a perfect little gentlewoman you will be!!!

You are not yet arrived at the first stage of your journey, yet have I the sense of your absense so strong upon me that I was really thinking what news I had to send you, and what had happened since you had left us, truly nothing, except that Martin Bumey met us in Lincolns Inn Fields, and borrowed four–pence, of the repayment of which sum I will send you due notice.—

Capitolo II

Tales from Shakespeare

«My Tales». Perentoria e reiterata è la definizione che Mary Lamb dà dei racconti shakespeariani. Riferisce a Sarah Stoddart nel giugno del 1806 mentre è alle prese con la rielaborazione narrativa dei drammi del grande bardo: «you must tell me I Taleise, for my Tales seem to be all the subject matter I write about[1]». Ne ha già composti sei e riconosce subito in quella esperienza letteraria la cifra di una propria poetica.

Come si precisa nella prefazione, i *Tales* sono concepiti prevalentemente per un pubblico femminile e più precisamente per le «young ladies» col preciso intento di ottemperare a una proibizione costitutiva del sistema educativo del tempo. Alle fanciulle è consentito di accedere alla biblioteca paterna molto più tardi rispetto ai propri fratelli che possono, perciò, con anticipo apprezzare e leggere direttamente i grandi drammi shakespeariani. I *tales* dovrebbero sopperire a tale discriminazione di genere, ponendosi deliberatamente nel solco di un programma educativo riformista e progressista.[2] Non stupisce che nel racconto di apertura della raccolta, *The Tempest*, Prospero sorrida compiaciuto mentre si fa spettatore della prima e benevola disobbedienza della figlia Miranda alla realtà costruita sulla sapienza di quei libri salvati dal naufragio.

[1] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb. Volume II. 1801–1809*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1976, p. 229.

[2] Cfr. S. J. WOLFSON, «Explaining to Her Sister: Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespear*, in M. NOVY (ed.), *Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1990, pp. 16-40.

Nella *Preface*, perciò, si raccomanda ai fratelli di guidare amorevolmente le proprie sorelle alla lettura del «manly book». Tale è definito il testo shakespeariano ed è necessario accostarsi con circospezione poiché le «storie di uomini e donne» in esso contenute sono materia ostica per le fanciulle. Come pedagoghi i giovani fratelli dovranno spiegarle e renderle adatte alle giovani menti e successivamente scegliere dei passi idonei alle loro «orecchie».

> I must rather beg their kind assistance in explaining to their sister such parts as are hardest for them to understand; and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken.[3]

Difficoltosa è l'impresa di contenere l'impeto degli eventi di un dramma nella forma più composta di una narrazione logica e coerente («the regular form of a connected story») affinché gli animi delicati delle fanciulle non siano scossi. Arduo è trascrivere i momenti più insondabili dell'animo umano e comprimerli, secondo i presupposti estetici dei *Tales*, in poche righe e nella modalità narrativa di un *plainly speaking*. Se è prerogativa maschile il rimodellamento della materia più ostica, Mary lascerà che sia suo fratello Charles a occuparsi della riscrittura narrativa delle tragedie shakespeariane, riservando per lei le commedie e i *romances*.

Le premesse argomentative per una pratica virtuosa della *kind assistance* superano la soglia della moderna lezione educativa formulata dai Lamb per farsi materia narrativa. Ben visibile è la sua trasformazione in motivo strutturale e tematico in quella che può essere definita la cornice dei *Tales from Shakespeare*. Due *romances* sono posti all'inizio e alla fine della raccolta, non a caso entrambi riscritture di Mary, *The Tempest* e *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Molteplici sono i punti di

[3] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *Tales from Shakespeare*, Penguin Classics, London 2007, p. 4.

contatto tra i due racconti che con diverse tonalità e sfumature si propagano nella raccolta: il legame padre–figlia, la centralità della «young lady» che da destinataria della raccolta si impone come soggetto letterario e nuova eroina dalle innate qualità morali ed intellettive, i grandi temi della benevolenza e della compassione, vere forze morali delle relazioni umane, le sofferenze e le disavventure della vita come momenti di formazione del carattere, le memorie dell'infanzia. Soprattutto le due protagoniste, Miranda e Marina, oltre a condividere lo *status* di figlie senza madri («little motherless daughter[s]»), sono entrambe *sea-born*, nate dal mare. Il celebre motivo marino shakespeariano del mutamento e del rinnovamento si trasla nei racconti di mare di Mary Lamb come trasformazione simbolica dell'iniziazione e della crescita delle giovani eroine. Il mare prelude e consacra il processo della *bildung* tutto al femminile che anima le vicende narrative dei *Tales*. "Da Miranda a Marina" è il percorso di un ideale *improvement* esplicitato nell'*Advertisement* alla seconda edizione dei *Tales* del 1809: «young ladies advancing to the state of womanhood» . Da eroina, spettatrice del carico di anime in balia delle onde, a protagonista della variabilità avventurosa dell'elemento generatore di sofferenza e rinascita.

> Having these powerful spirits obedient to his will, Prospero could by their means command the winds, and the waves of the sea. By his orders they raised a violent storm, in the midst of which, and struggling with the wild sea–waves that every moment threatened to swallow it up, he showed his daughter a fine large ship, which he told her was full of living beings like themselves.[4]

> The sea was no friendly element to unhappy Pericles, for long before they reached Tyre another dreadful tempest arose, which so terrified Thaisa that she was taken ill, and in a short space of time her nurse Lychorida came to Pericles with a little child in her harms, to tell the prince the sad tidings that his wife died the moment her little babe was born. She held the babe towards its father, saying, «Here is a thing too young for such a place. This is the child of your dead queen». No tongue can tell the dreadful sufferings of Pericles when he heard his

[4] Ivi, p. 8.

> wife was dead. […] «Patience, good sir,» said Lychorida, «here is all that is left alive of our queen, a little daughter, and for your child's sake be more manly».[5]

Il grande mare che irrompe sulle spiagge della mortalità, come vero demiurgo narrativo nei destini degli uomini, trasforma tutto repentinamente e genera anche il mutamento di sesso nel protagonista della *children's literature*. La figura maschile del *Child*, incarnazione di innocenza, sensibilità, gioia visionaria, celebrato dai maggiori poeti romantici, come Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, cede il passo alla *daughter* che esce dalle acque come individuo idealizzato al pari di quel fanciullo. La nuova eroina rinasce in una versione giovanile dell'icona materna e si fa custode e testimonianza vivente del suo ritratto di eccellenza morale, bellezza impareggiabile e sensibilità d'animo.

Soprattutto, la forza trasformativa della crescita muta la fanciulla-protagonista da ascoltatrice di racconti, attenta ed empatica, a eccellente *story-teller*, capace di saper raccontare ciò che la lingua non può dire e di penetrare senza strappi ed eccessi nell'animo dell'ascoltatore. L'iniziale *kind assistance* profusa come protezione maschile da parte di Prospero trasfonde in Marina e nella sua arte benefica del raccontare grazie alla quale l'animo affranto del proprio padre è curato. La trasmutazione delle qualità maschili nell'animo di una fanciulla dice di una parabola compiuta nel mondo dell'esperienza, a tutte le latitudini (da Oriente a Occidente) e nell'estrema variabilità delle condizioni di vita (da principessa a serva). Ciò che Miranda ha appreso nell'isola, Marina lo ha vissuto nel mondo. La chiusa dei *Tales* sposta i limiti circoscritti dell'educazione femminile, supera i confini del domestico e apre a nuovi orizzonti.

In un rovesciamento di ruoli tra il maschile e il femminile, Pericle diviene il protagonista di un racconto sentimentale sopraffatto dalle sofferenze e Marina l'eroina della forza e della

[5] Ivi, pp. 257-258.

pazienza, dalla statura epica, che con l'operosità, l'azione e la dedizione verso il prossimo ha contrastato le avversità della vita.

> «Tell me your story,» answered Pericles; «if I find you have known the thousandth part of my endurance, you have borne your sorrows like a man, and I have suffered like a girl; yet you do look like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling Extremity out of act. Tell me your name, my most kind virgin? Recount your story, I beseech you. Come, sit by me».[6]

Le giovani eroine diventano soggetti attivi attraverso l'uso della parola e la pregevole arte del conversare risarcendo talvolta le madri dalle prigioni di silenzio dove è concretamente relegata Hermione per volontà di suo marito Leonte. I modi, infatti, semplici ed eleganti di sua figlia Perdita nel conversare coll'innamorato Florizel stupiscono re Polissene, l'altro ottuso interprete di una visione patriarcale.

> The simple yet elegant manner in which Perdita conversed with his son did not a little surprise Polixenes: he said to Camillo, «This is the prettiest low–born lass I ever saw; nothing she does or says but looks like something greater than herself, too noble for this place».[7]

È necessario saper raccontare nei modi più consoni all'ascoltatore e la capacità di trasformare le storie in *soft tales* è propria dei guaritori dell'animo e della mente. A questo principio trasformativo sono sottoposti tutti i drammi di Shakespeare. Anche quando Mary Lamb affronta il mondo fatato di *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, la commedia shakespeariana che più di altre pone un confronto con l'incredibile e lo strano e che può, perciò, rischiare di turbare o fuorviare la fervida immaginazione infantile, dovrà con cautela indirizzarsi direttamente alle piccole lettrici e offrire nella chiusa una spiegazione che renda anche quella storia «pretty

[6] Ivi, p. 266.
[7] Ivi, p. 35.

harmless». Si precisa che non si tratta di realtà, solo di visioni venute in sogno:

> And now, if any are offended with this story of fairies and their pranks, as judging it incredible and strange, they have only to think that they have been asleep and dreaming, and that all these adventures were visions which they saw in their sleep: and I hope none of my readers will be so unreasonable as to be offended with a pretty harmless Midsummer Night's Dream.[8]

Le implicazioni metanarrative della buona arte del raccontare con i suoi effetti educativi e terapeutici con i quali i Lamb operano un decisivo rinnovamento del racconto pedagogico, investono altresì trame e personaggi. La Desdemona di Charles Lamb si innamora di Othello, un affabulatore dalle pregevoli qualità morali, e con avidità divora i suoi racconti benefici per il suo orecchio. Non dissimile è la funzione dello zio marinaio per Elizabeth Villiers nel racconto che apre la raccolta *Mrs. Leicester's School*. Lo zio James, come Othello, ha viaggiato a lungo e i racconti delle sue avventure appassionano Elizabeth e sono decisivi per la formazione del suo carattere. Desdemona è destinata, però, all'esperienza contraria della forza devastante della parola che scuote i nervi fino al cedimento. Svenimenti, follia e morte sono le ripercussioni fisiche dello *ill-usage* che apre all'esperienza di dolore e che innerva anche le trame tratte dalle commedie. E infatti, "racconti d'inverno" sono i *tales* di Mary Lamb. Nell'impianto narrativo rimodulano la sequenza allegorica del racconto *The Winter's Tale* in cui la storia di felicità e innocenza raccontata da un bambino alla propria madre è brutalmente interrotta dal dolore della separazione:

> [Leontes] went to the queen's apartment, where the good lady was sitting with her little son Mamillius, who was just beginning to tell one of his best stories to amuse his mother, when the king entered, and taking the child away, sent Hermione to prison.

[8] Ivi, p. 29.

> Mamillius, though but a very young child, loved his mother tenderly; and when he saw her so dishonoured, and found she was taken from him to be put into prison, he took it deeply to heart, and drooped and pined away by slow degrees, losing his appetite and his sleep, till it was thought his grief would kill him.[9]

Se lo statuto drammaturgico della commedia prevede un *happy ending*, i finali della Lamb ricuciono le ferite su note serene di risarcimento e guarigione. Esemplare è il finale del racconto *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. La ricomposizione delle avversità è ad opera di una figura emblematica, già comparsa a curare la follia di Lear, «a most skilful physician», un abile e valente medico, qui dal nome Cerimon. La presenza fisica di un medico dà corpo al reiterato lessico medico impiegato negli scioglimenti dei diversi raccolti in cui le ricorrenze di parole come «recovery», «recover» e «restore» segnalano come guarigioni le finali ricomposizioni degli strappi avvenuti nei legami e negli affetti. L'ultimo paragrafo della raccolta è un vero elogio alla conoscenza medica paragonata a un dono divino per l'azione benefica che svolge per l'umanità: «In the worthy Cerimon, who restored Thaisa to life, we are instructed how goodness directed by knowledge, in bestowing benefits upon mankind, approches to the nature of the gods.»[10]. Una nota, certo, che dà un'ulteriore prova di un dialogo costante tra i Romantici e il pensiero neuro-scientifico[11] del tempo e, nel caso particolare, di un'influenza dei trattati medici sui lavori per l'infanzia di Mary Lamb.

Cerimon riporta in vita Thaisa, moglie di Pericle, dopo essere stata sepolta nelle profondità del mare. Si crede, infatti, sia morta dando alla luce sua figlia. La complessa interrelazione tra madri e figlie, fulcro tematico nella produzione della Lamb, qui nella drastica e mutua esclusività tra morte e vita, si ricompone grazie allo scrupoloso e benevolo intervento medico. Cerimon comprende, scrutando attentamente gli occhi di

[9] Ivi, p. 31.
[10] Ivi, p. 270
[11] A. RICHARDSON, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, *passim*.

Thaisa, che a quel cadavere, stranamente sepolto, chiuso in una cesta, si può ridare il soffio vitale.

> [Cerimon] did not believe her to be dead. He ordered a fire to be made, and proper cordials to be brought, and soft music to be played, which might help to calm her amazed spirits if she should revive; and he said to those who crowded round her, wondering at what they saw, «I pray you, gentlemen, give her air; this queen will live; she has not been entranced above five hours; and see, she begins to blow into life again; she is alive; behold, her eyelids move; this fair creatures will live to make us weep to hear her fate». Thaisa had never died, but after the birth of her little baby had fallen into a deep swoon, which made all that saw her conclude her to be dead.[12]

La visione della rigidità cadaverica del corpo della madre è l'esperienza emozionale che disegna nell'animo di chi osserva un ritratto idealizzato. Il materno come modello di moralità[13] si imprime nel racconto *The Winter's Tale* con la fissità statuaria di Hermione. Solo dopo che Leontes, suo marito, e Perdita, sua figlia, avranno contemplato la perfezione incomparabile della sua figura, può Hermione abbandonare il piedistallo e ricongiungersi a loro secondo la parabola narrativa del «lost» e «found». Nella struggente antitesi, «the newly found Perdita», c'è il percorso di sofferenza di quel ritrovamento e e di quel ricongiungimento.

> Paulina then ordered some slow and solemn music, which she had prepared for the purpose, to strike up; and to the amazement of all the beholders, the statue came down from off the pedestal, and threw its arms around Leontes'neck. The statue then began to speak, praying for blessings on her husband, and on her child, the newly found Perdita.
> No wonder that the statue hung upon Leontes'neck, and blessed her husband and her child. No wonder; for the statue was indeed Hermione herself, the real, the living queen.[14]

[12] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*,, pp. 259-260.
[13] L. TOSI, *Raccontare Shakespeare ai bambini. Adattamenti, riscritture, riduzioni dall'800 a oggi*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2014, p. 34.
[14] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*, p. 260

La vista di Hermione per Leontes rinnova il dolore per le colpe commesse. Sotto l'impeto di una irrefrenabile passione quel padre diviene l'artefice di un dramma familiare che si acuisce in una spirale di eventi tragici: la prigionia di sua moglie, la morte del figlio e la perdita di sua figlia. È, infatti, il mondo degli adulti a causare sofferenze e dolori, perlopiù ai propri figli. Contrariamente al campionario ottocentesco dei bambini cattivi dei *moral tales* che ricevono da educatori e genitori punizioni per atti di imprudenza o disobbedienza, nei *tales* shakespeariani si assistete ai rimproveri dei fanciulli rivolti agli adulti o ai propri genitori. La raccolta si apre con l'invettiva paradigmatica di una figlia al proprio padre. Miranda accusa Prospero di crudeltà per il maltrattamento a cui sta sottoponendo Ferdinando: «Miranda hung upon her father, saying, "Why are you so ungentle? Have pity, sir […]"[15]».

Sono solo espedienti magici, però, gli ostacoli che Prospero mette in campo per comprendere i sentimenti dei due giovani, per di più farà ricorso alla sua bacchetta magica per avvolgere Miranda in un sonno che la protegga e la ristori da turbamenti e inquietudini che potrebbero mettere a dura prova i nervi di una fanciulla.

Reale e dagli effetti talvolta irreversibili è, invece, lo *ill-usage* che Leontes riserva alla sua famiglia, paragonabile alla furia di Othello ai danni di Desdemona. Leontes, però, posto di fronte alla vista di Hermione, rinnoverà nel ricordo l'esperienza emotiva di una coscienza che si perde nei suoi eccessi. Con il perdono concesso da sua moglie e dall'amico Polixenes e con l'aiuto di Paulina, vera guida psicologica nel superamento del dolore della colpa, il re può risarcire le gioie negate e perse.

> «Either forbear this transport,» said Paulina to Leontes, «and let me draw the curtain; or prepare yourself for more amazement. I can make the statue move indeed; aye, and descend from off the pedestal, and take you by the hand. But then you will think, which I protest I am not, that I am assisted by some wicked power». «What you can make her do,» said the astonished king, «I am content to look upon. What

[15] Ivi, p. 12.

> you can make her speak, I am content to hear; for it is as easy to make her speak as move».[16]

Si può, così, ristabilire l'infranto culto della maternità violato con estrema ferocia.

Pericles, Prince of Tyre

Pericles, prince of Tyre, became a voluntary exile from his dominions, to avert the dreadful calamities which Antiochus, the wicked emperor of Greece, threatened to bring upon his subjects and city of Tyre, in revenge for a discovery which the prince had made of a shocking deed which the emperor had done in secret; as commonly it proves dangerous to pry into the hidden crimes of great ones. Leaving the government of his people in the hands of his able and honest minister, Helicanus, Pericles set sail from Tyre, thinking to absent himself till the wrath of Antiochus, who was mighty, should be appeased.

The first place which the prince directed his course to was Tarsus, and hearing that the city of Tarsus was at that time suffering under a severe famine, he took with him store of provisions for its relief. On his arrival he found the city reduced to the utmost distress; and, he coming like a messenger from heaven with his unhoped–for succour, Cleon, the governor of Tarsus, welcomed him with boundless thanks. Pericles had not been here many days, before letters came from his faithful minister, warning him that it was not safe for him to stay at Tarsus, for Antiochus knew of his abode, and by secret emissaries despatched for that purpose sought his life. Upon receipt of these letters Pericles put out to sea again, amidst the blessings and prayers of a whole people who had been fed by his bounty.

He had not sailed far, when his ship was overtaken by a dreadful storm, and every man on board perished except Pericles, who was cast by the sea–waves naked on an unknown

[16] Ivi, p. 39.

shore, where he had not wandered long before he met with some poor fishermen, who invited him to their homes, giving him clothes and provisions. The fishermen told Pericles the name of their country was Pentapolis, and that their king was Simonides, commonly called the good Simonides, because of his peaceable reign and good government. From them he also learned that king Simonides had a fair young daughter, and that the following day was her birthday, when a grand tournament was to be held at court, many princes and knights being come from all parts to try their skill in arms for the love of Thaisa, this fair princess. While the prince was listening to this account, and secretly lamenting the loss of his good armour, which disabled him from making one among these valiant knights, another fisherman brought in a complete suit of armour that he had taken out of the sea with his fishing–net, which proved to be the very armour he had lost. When Pericles beheld his own armour, he said: «Thanks, Fortune; after all my crosses you give me somewhat to repair myself. This armour was bequeathed to me by my dead father, for whose dear sake I have so loved it that whithersoever I went, I still have kept it by me, and the rough sea that parted it from me, having now become calm, hath given it back again, for which I thank it for, since I have my father's gift again, I think my shipwreck no misfortune».

The next day Pericles clad in his brave father's armour, repaired to the royal court of Simonides, where he performed wonders at the tournament, vanquishing with ease all the brave knights and valiant princes who contended with him in arms for the honour of Thaisa's love. When brave warriors contended at court tournaments for the love of king's daughters, if one proved sole victor over all the rest, it was usual for the great lady for whose sake these deeds of velour were undertaken, to bestow all her respect upon the conqueror, and Thaisa did not depart from this custom, for she presently dismissed all the princes and knights whom Pericles had vanquished, and distinguished him by her especial favour and regard, crowning him with the wrath of victory, as king of that day's happiness;

and Pericles became a most passionate lover of this beauteous princess from the first moment he beheld her.

The good Simonides so well approved of the velour and noble qualities of Pericles, who was indeed a most accomplished gentleman, and well learned in all excellent arts, that though he knew not the rank of this royal stranger (for Pericles for fear of Antiochus gave out that he was a private gentleman of Tyre), yet did not Simonides disdain to accept of the valiant unknown for a son–in–law, when he perceived his daughter's affections were firmly fixed upon him.

Pericles had not been many months married to Thaisa, before he received intelligence that his enemy Antiochus was dead, and that his subjects of Tyre, impatient of his long absence, threatened to revolt, and talked of placing Helicanus upon his vacant throne. This news came from Helicanus himself, who, being a loyal subject to his royal master, would not accept of the high dignity offered him, but sent to let Pericles know their intentions, that he might return home and resume his lawful right. It was matter of great surprise and joy to Simonides, to kind that his son–in–law (the obscure knight) was the renowned prince of Tyre; yet again he regretted that he was not the private gentleman he supposed him to be, seeing that he must now part both with his admired son–in–law and his beloved daughter, whom he feared to trust to the perils of the sea, because Thaisa was with child; and Pericles himself wished her to remain with her father till after her confinement, but the poor lady so earnestly desired to go with her husband, that at last they consented, hoping she would reach Tyre before she was brought to bed.

The sea was no friendly element to unhappy Pericles, for long before they reached Tyre another dreadful tempest arose, which so terrified Thaisa that she was taken ill, and in a short space of time her nurse Lychorida came to Pericles with a little child in her arms, to tell the prince the sad tidings that his wife died the moment her little babe was born. She held the babe towards its father, saying: «Here is a thing too young for such a place. This is the child of your dead queen». No tongue can tell

the dreadful sufferings of Pericles when he heard his wife was dead. As soon as he could speak, he said: «O you gods, why do you make us love your goodly gifts, and then snatch those gifts away?» «Patience, good sir,» said Lychorida, «here is all that is left alive of our dead queen, a little daughter, and for your child's sake be more manly. Patience, good sir, even for the sake of this precious charge». Pericles took the new–born infant in his arms, and he said to the little babe: «Now may your life be mild, for a more blusterous birth had never babe! May your condition be mild and gentle, for you have had the rudest welcome that ever prince's child did meet with! May that which follows be happy, for you have had as chiding a nativity as fire, air, water, earth, and heaven could make to herald you from the womb! Even at the first, your loss,» meaning in the death of her mother, «is more than all the joys, which you shall find upon this earth to which you are come a new visitor, shall be able to recompense».

The storm still continuing to rage furiously, and the sailors having a superstition that while a dead body remained in the ship the storm would never cease, they came to Pericles to demand that his queen should be thrown overboard; and they said: «What courage, sir? God save you!» «Courage enough,» said the sorrowing prince: «I do not fear the storm; it has done to me its worst; yet for the love of this poor infant, this fresh new seafarer, I wish the storm was over». «Sir,» said the sailors, «your queen must overboard. The sea works high, the wind is loud, and the storm will not abate till the ship be cleared of the dead». Though Pericles knew how weak and unfounded this superstition was, yet he patiently submitted, saying: «As you think meet. Then she must overboard, most wretched queen!» And now this unhappy prince went to take a last view of his dear wife, and as he looked on his Thaisa, he said: «A terrible childbed hast thou had, my dear; no light, no fire; the unfriendly elements forget thee utterly, nor have I time to bring thee hallowed to thy grave, but must cast thee scarcely coffined into the sea, where for a monument upon thy bones the humming waters must overwhelm thy corpse, lying with simple shells. O

Lychorida, bid Nestor bring me spices, ink, and paper, my casket and my jewels, and bid Nicandor bring me the satin coffin. Lay the babe upon the pillow, and go about this suddenly, Lychorida, while I say a priestly farewell to my Thaisa».

They brought Pericles a large chest, in which (wrapped in a satin shroud) he placed his queen, and sweet–smelling spices he strewed over her, and beside her he placed rich jewels, and a written paper, telling who she was, and praying if haply any one should kind the chest which contained the body of his wife, they would give her burial: and then with his own hands he cast the chest into the sea. When the storm was over, Pericles ordered the sailors to make for Tarsus. «For,» said Pericles, «the babe cannot hold out till we come to Tyre. At Tarsus I will leave it at careful nursing».

After that tempestuous night when Thaisa was thrown into the sea, and while it was yet early morning, as Cerimon, a worthy gentleman of Ephesus, and a most skilful physician, was standing by the sea–side, his servants brought to him a chest, which they said the sea–waves had thrown on the land. «I never saw,» said one of them, «so huge a billow as cast it on our shore». Cerimon ordered the chest to be conveyed to his own house and when it was opened he beheld with wonder the body of a young and lovely lady; and the sweet–smelling spices and rich casket of jewels made him conclude it was some great person who was thus strangely entombed: searching farther, he discovered a paper, from which he learned that the corpse which lay as dead before him had been a queen, and wife to Pericles, prince of Tyre; and much admiring at the strangeness of that accident, and more pitying the husband who had lost this sweet lady, he said: «If you are living, Pericles, you have a heart that even cracks with woe». Then observing attentively Thaisa's face, he saw how fresh and unlike death her looks were, and he said: «They were too hasty that threw you into the sea»: for he did not believe her to be dead. He ordered a fire to be made, and proper cordials to be brought, and soft music to be played, which might help to calm her amazed spirits if she

should revive; and he said to those who crowded round her, wondering at what they saw: «I pray you, gentlemen, give her air; this queen will live; she has not been entranced above five hours; and see, she begins to blow into life again; she is alive; behold, her eyelids move; this fair creature will live to make us weep to hear her fate». Thaisa had never died, but after the birth of her little baby had fallen into a deep swoon, which made all that saw her conclude her to be dead; and now by the care of this kind gentleman she once more revived to light and life; and opening her eyes, she said: «Where am I? Where is my lord What world is this?» By gentle degrees Cerimon let her understand what had befallen her; and when he thought she was enough recovered to bear the sight, he showed her the paper written by her husband, and the jewels; and she looked on the paper, and said: «It is my lord's writing. That I was shipped at sea, I well remember, but whether there delivered of my babe, by the holy gods I cannot rightly say; but since my wedded lord I never shall see again, I will put on a vestal livery, and never more have joy». «Madam,» said Cerimon, «if you purpose as you speak, the temple of Diana is not far distant from hence; there you may abide as a vestal. Moreover, if you please, a niece of mine shall there attend you». This proposal was accepted with thanks by Thaisa; and when she was perfectly recovered, Cerimon placed her in the temple of Diana, where she became a vestal or priestess of that goddess, and passed her days in sorrowing for her husband's supposed loss, and in the most devout exercises of those times.

Pericles carried his young daughter (whom he named Marina, because she was born at sea) to Tarsus, intending to leave her with Cleon, the governor of that city, and his wife Dionysia, thinking, for the good he had done to them at the time of their famine, they would be kind to his little motherless daughter. When Cleon saw prince Pericles, and heard of the great loss which had befallen him, he said: «O your sweet queen, that it had pleased Heaven you could have brought her hither to have blessed my eyes with the sight of her!» Pericles replied: «We must obey the powers above us. Should I rage and

roar as the sea does in which my Thaisa lies, yet the end must be as it is. My gentle babe, Marina here, I must charge your charity with her. I leave her the infant of your care, beseeching you to give her princely training». And then turning to Cleon's wife, Dionysia, he said: «Good madam, make me blessed in your care in bringing up my child»: and she answered: «I have a child myself who shall not be more dear to my respect than yours, my lord»; and Cleon made the like promise, saying: «Your noble services, prince Pericles, in feeding my whole people with your corn (for which in their prayers they daily remember you) must in your child be thought on. If I should neglect your child, my whole people that were by you relieved would force me to my duty; but if to that I need a spur, the gods revenge it on me and mine to the end of generation». Pericles being thus assured that his child would be carefully attended to, left her to the protection of Cleon and his wife Dionysia, and with her he left the nurse Lychorida. When he went away, the little Marina knew not her loss, but Lychorida wept sadly at parting with her royal master. «O, no tears, Lychorida,» said Pericles: «no tears; look to your little mistress, on whose grace you may depend hereafter».

Pericles arrived in safety at Tyre, and was once more settled in the quiet possession of his throne, while his woeful queen, whom he thought dead, remained at Ephesus. Her little babe Marina, whom this hapless mother had never seen, was brought up by Cleon in a manner suitable to her high birth. He gave her the most careful education, so that by the time Marina attained the age of fourteen years, the most deeply–learned men were not more studied in the learning of those times than was Marina. She sang like one immortal, and danced as goddesslike, and with her needle she was so skilful that she seemed to compose nature's own shapes, in birds, fruits, or flowers, the natural roses being scarcely more like to each other than they were to Marina's silken flowers. But when she had gained from education all these graces, which made her the general wonder, Dionysia, the wife of Cleon, became her mortal enemy from jealousy, by reason that her own daughter, from the slowness of

her mind, was not able to attain to that perfection wherein Marina excelled: and finding that all praise was bestowed on Marina, whilst her daughter, who was of the same age, and had been educated with the same care as Marina, though not with the same success, was in comparison disregarded, she formed a project to remove Marina out of the way, vainly imagining that her untoward daughter would be more respected when Marina was no more seen. To encompass this she employed a man to murder Marina, and she well timed her wicked design, when Lychorida, the faithful nurse, had just died. Dionysia was discoursing with the man she had commanded to commit this murder, when the young Marina was weeping over the dead Lychorida. Leonine, the man she employed to do this bad deed, though he was a very wicked man, could hardly be persuaded to undertake it, so had Marina won all hearts to love her. He said: «She is a goodly creature!» «The tatter then the gods should have her,» replied her merciless enemy: «here she comes weeping for the death of her nurse Lychorida: are you resolved to obey me?» Leonine, fearing to disobey her, replied: «I am resolved.» And so, in that one short sentence, was the matchless Marina doomed to an untimely death. She now approached, with a basket of flowers in her hand, which she said she would daily strew over the grave of good Lychorida. The purple violet and the marigold should as a carpet hang upon her grave, while summer days did last. «Alas, for me!» she said, «poor unhappy maid, born in a tempest, when my mother died. This world to me is like a lasting storm, hurrying me from my friends». «How now, Marina,» said the dissembling Dionysia, «do you weep alone? How does it chance my daughter is not with you? Do not sorrow for Lychorida, you have a nurse in me. Your beauty is quite changed with this unprofitable woe. Come, give me your flowers, the sea–air will spoil them; and walk with Leonine: the air is fine, and will enliven you. Come, Leonine, take her by the arm, and walk with her». «No, madam,» said Marina, «I pray you let me not deprive you of your servant»: for Leonine was one of Dionysia's attendants. «Come, come,» said this artful woman, who wished for a presence to leave her alone with

Leonine, «I love the prince, your father, and I love you. We every day expect your father here; and when he comes, and finds you so changed by grief from the paragon of beauty we reported you, he will think we have taken no care of you. Go, I pray you, walk, and be cheerful once again. Be careful of that excellent complexion, which stole the hearts of old and young». Marina, being thus importuned, said: «Well, I will go, but yet I have no desire to it». As Dionysia walked away, she said to Leonine: «Remember what I have said!» – shocking words, for their meaning was that he should remember to kill Marina.

Marina looked towards the sea, her birthplace, and said: «Is the wind westerly that blows?» «South-west,» replied Leonine. «When I was born the wind was north,» said she: and then the storm and tempest, and all her father's sorrows, and her mother's death, came full into her mind; and she said: «My father, as Lychorida told me, did never fear, but cried, Courage, good seamen, to the sailors, galling his princely hands with the ropes, and, clasping to the masts, he endured a sea that almost split the deck». «When was this?» said Leonine. «When I was born,» replied Marina: «never were wind and waves more violent»; and then she described the storm, the action of the sailors, the boatswain's whistle, and the loud call of the master, «which,» said she, «trebled the confusion of the ship». Lychorida had so often recounted to Marina the story of her hapless birth that these things seemed ever present to her imagination. But here Leonine interrupted her with desiring her to say her prayers. «What mean you?» said Marina, who began to fear, she knew not why. «If you require a little space for prayer, I grant it,» said Leonine; «but be not tedious, the gods are quick of ear, and I am sworn to do my work in haste». «Will you kill me?» said Marina: «alas! why? «To satisfy my lady,» replied Leonine. «Why would she have me killed?» said Marina: «now, as I can remember, I never hurt her in all my life. I never spake bad word, nor did any ill turn to any living creature. Believe me now, I never killed a mouse, nor hurt a fly. I trod upon a worm once against my will, but I wept for it. How have I offended?» The murderer replied: «My commission is

not to reason on the deed, but to do it.» And he was just going to kill her, when certain pirates happened to land at that very moment, who seeing Marina, bore her off as a prize to their ship.

The pirate who had made Marina his prize carried her to Mitylene, and sold her for a slave, where, though in that humble condition, Marina soon became known throughout the whole city of Mitylene for her beauty and her virtues; and the person to whom she was sold became rich by the money she earned for him. She taught music, dancing, and fine needleworks, and the money she got by her scholars she gave to her master and mistress; and the fame of her learning and her great industry came to the knowledge of Lysimachus, a young nobleman who was governor of Mitylene, and Lysimachus went himself to the house where Marina dwelt, to see this paragon of excellence, whom all the city praised so highly. Her conversation delighted Lysimachus beyond measure, for though he had heard much of this admired maiden, he did not expect to find her so sensible a lady, so virtuous, and so good, as he perceived Marina to be; and he left her, saying, he hoped she would persevere in her industrious and virtuous course, and that if ever she heard from him again it should be for her good. Lysimachus thought Marina such a miracle for sense, fine breeding, and excellent qualities, as well as for beauty and all outward graces, that he wished to marry her, and notwithstanding her humble situation, he hoped to find that her birth was noble; but ever when they asked her parentage she would sit still and weep.

Meantime, at Tarsus, Leonine, fearing the anger of Dionysia, told her he had killed Marina; and that wicked woman gave out that she was dead, and made a pretended funeral for her, and erected a stately monument; and shortly after Pericles, accompanied by his royal minister Helicanus, made a voyage from Tyre to Tarsus, on purpose to see his daughter, intending to take her home with him: and he never having beheld her since he left her an infant in the care of Cleon and his wife, how did this good prince rejoice at the thought of seeing this dear child of his buried queen! but when they told him Marina was

dead, and showed the monument they had erected for her, great was the misery this most wretched father endured, and not being able to bear the sight of that country where his last hope and only memory of his dear Thaisa was entombed, he took ship, and hastily departed from Tarsus. From the day he entered the ship a dull and heavy melancholy seized him. He never spoke, and seemed totally insensible to everything around him.

Sailing from Tarsus to Tyre, the ship in its course passed by Mitylene, where Marina dwelt; the governor of which place, Lysimachus, observing this royal vessel from the shore, and desirous of knowing who was on board, went in a barge to the side of the ship, to satisfy his curiosity. Helicanus received him very courteously and told him that the ship came from Tyre, and that they were conducting thither.

Pericles, their prince; «A man, sir,» said Helicanus, «who has not spoken to any one these three months, nor taken any sustenance, but just to prolong his grief; it would be tedious to repeat the whole ground of his distemper, but the main springs from the loss of a beloved daughter and a wife». Lysimachus begged to see this afflicted prince, and when he beheld Pericles, he saw he had been once a goodly person, and he said to him: «Sir king, all hail, the gods preserve you, hail, royal sir!» But in vain Lysimachus spoke to him; Pericles made no answer, nor did he appear to perceive any stranger approached. And then Lysimachus bethought him of the peerless maid Marina, that haply with her sweet tongue she might win some answer from the silent prince: and with the consent of Helicanus he sent for Marina, and when she entered the ship in which her own father sat motionless with grief, they welcomed her on board as if they had known she was their princess; and they cried: «She is a gallant lady». Lysimachus was well pleased to hear their commendations, and he said: «She is such a one, that were I well assured she came of noble birth, I would wish no better choice, and think me rarely blessed in a wife». And then he addressed her in courtly terms, as if the lowly–seeming maid had been the high–born lady he wished to kind her, calling her Fair and beautiful Marina, telling her a great prince on board

that ship had fallen into a sad and mournful silence; and, as if Marina had the power of conferring health and felicity, he begged she would undertake to cure the royal stranger of his melancholy. «Sir,» said Marina, «I will use my utmost skill in his recovery, provided none but I and my maid be suffered to come near him».

She, who at Mitylene had so carefully concealed her birth, ashamed to tell that one of royal ancestry was now a slave, first began to speak to Pericles of the wayward changes in her own fate, telling him from what a high estate herself had fallen. As if she had known it was her royal father she stood before, all the words she spoke were of her own sorrows; but her reason for so doing was, that she knew nothing more wins the attention of the unfortunate than the recital of some sad calamity to match their own. The sound of her sweet voice aroused the drooping prince; he lifted up his eyes, which had been so long fixed and motionless; and Marina, who was the perfect image of her mother, presented to his amazed sight the features of his dead queen. The long–silent prince was once more heard to speak. «My dearest wife,» said the awakened Pericles, «was like this maid, and such a one might my daughter have been. My queen's square brows, her stature to an inch, as wand–like straight, as silver–voiced, her eyes as jewel–like. Where do you live, young maid? Report your parentage. I think you said you had been tossed from wrong to injury, and that you thought your griefs would equal mine, if both were opened». «Some such thing I said,» replied Marina, «and said no more than what my thoughts did warrant me as likely». «Tell me your story,» answered Pericles; «if I find you have known the thousandth part of my endurance, you have borne your sorrows like a man, and I have suffered like a girl; yet you do look like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling extremity out of act. How lost you your name, my most kind virgin? Recount your story I beseech you. Come, sit by me». How was Pericles surprised when she said her name was Marina, for he knew it was no usual name, but had been invented by himself for his own child to signify seaborn: «O, I am mocked,» said he, «and you are

sent hither by some incensed god to make the world laugh at me». «Patience, good sir,» said Marina, «or I must cease here.» «Nay,» said Pericles, «I will be patient; you little know how you do startle me, to call yourself Marina». «The name,» she replied, «was given me by one that had some power, my father, and a king». «How, a king's daughter!» said Pericles, «and called Marina! But are you flesh and blood? Are you no fairy? Speak on; where were you born? and wherefore called Marina?» She replied: «I was called Marina, because I was born at sea. My mother was the daughter of a king; she died the minute I was born, as my good nurse Lychorida has often told me weeping. The king, my father, left me at Tarsus, till the cruel wife of Cleon sought to murder me. A crew of pirates came and rescued me, and brought me here to Mitylene. But, good sir, why do you weep? It may be, you think me an impostor. But, indeed, sir, I am the daughter to king Pericles, if good king Pericles be living». Then Pericles, terrified as he seemed at his own sudden joy, and doubtful if this could be real, loudly called for his attendants, who rejoiced at the sound of their beloved king's voice; and he said to Helicanus: «O Helicanus, strike me, give me a gash, put me to present pain, lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me, overbear the shores of my mortality. O, come hither, thou that west born at sea, buried at Tarsus, and found at sea again. O Helicanus, down on your knees, thank the holy gods! This is Marina. Now blessings on thee, my child! Give me fresh garments, mine own Helicanus! She is not dead at Tarsus as she should have been by the savage Dionysia. She shall tell you all, when you shall kneel to her and call her your very princess. Who is this?' (observing Lysimachus for the first time). «Sir,» said Helicanus, «it is the governor of Mitylene, who, hearing of your melancholy, came to see you.» «I embrace you, sir,» said Pericles. «Give me my robes! I am wild with beholding – O heaven bless my girl! But hark, what music is that?» – for now, either sent by some kind god, or by his own delighted fancy deceived, he seemed to hear soft music. «My lord, I hear none,» replied Helicanus. «None?» said Pericles; «why it is the music of the spheres». As there was

no music to be heard, Lysimachus concluded that the sudden joy had unsettled the prince's understanding; and he said: «It is not good to cross him: let him have his way»: and then they told him they heard the music; and he now complaining of a drowsy slumber coming over him, Lysimachus persuaded him to rest on a couch, and placing a pillow under his head, he, quite overpowered with excess of joy, sank into a sound sleep, and Marina watched in silence by the couch of her sleeping parent.

While he slept, Pericles dreamed a dream which made him resolve to go to Ephesus. His dream was, that Diana, the goddess of the Ephesians, appeared to him, and commanded him to go to her temple at Ephesus, and there before her altar to declare the story of his life and misfortunes; and by her silver bow she swore, that if he performed her injunction, he should meet with some rate felicity. When he awoke, being miraculously refreshed, he told his dream, and that his resolution was to obey the bidding of the goddess.

Then Lysimachus invited Pericles to come on shore, and refresh himself with such entertainment as he should find at Mitylene, which courteous offer Pericles accepting, agreed to tarry with him for the space of a day or two. During which time we may well suppose what feastings, what rejoicings, what costly shows and entertainments the governor made in Mitylene, to greet the royal father of his dear Marina, whom in her obscure fortunes he had so respected. Nor did Pericles frown upon Lysimachus's suit, when he understood how he had honoured his child in the days of her low estate, and that Marina showed herself not averse to his proposals; only he made it a condition, before he gave his consent, that they should visit with him the shrine of the Ephesian Diana: to whose temple they shortly after all three undertook a voyage; and, the goddess herself filling their sails with prosperous winds, after a few weeks they arrived in safety at Ephesus.

There was standing near the altar of the goddess, when Pericles with his train entered the temple, the good Cerimon (now grown very aged) who had restored Thaisa, the wife of Pericles, to life; and Thaisa, now a priestess of the temple, was

standing before the altar; and though the many years he had passed in sorrow for her loss had much altered Pericles, Thaisa thought she knew her husband's features, and when he approached the altar and began to speak, she remembered his voice, and listened to his words with wonder and a joyful amazement. And these were the words that Pericles spoke before the altar: «Hail, Diana! to perform thy just commands, I here confess myself the prince of Tyre, who, frighted from my country, at Pentapolis wedded the fair Thaisa: she died at sea in childbed, but brought forth a maid–child called Marina. She at Tarsus was nursed with Dionysia, who at fourteen years thought to kill her, but her better stars brought her to Mitylene, by whose shores as I sailed, her good fortunes brought this maid on board, where by her most clear remembrance she made herself known to be my daughter».

Thaisa, unable to bear the transports which his words had raised in her, cried out: «You are, you are, O royal Pericles» and fainted. «What means this woman?» said Pericles: «she dies! gentlemen, help.» «Sir,» said Cerimon, «if you have told Diana's altar true, this is your wife». «Reverend gentleman, no,» said Pericles: «I threw her overboard with these very arms». Cerimon then recounted how, early one tempestuous morning, this lady was thrown upon the Ephesian shore; how, opening the coffin, he found therein rich jewels, and a paper; how, happily, he recovered her, and placed her here in Diana's temple. And now, Thaisa being restored from her swoon said: «O my lord, are you not Pericles? Like him you speak, like him you are. Did you not name a tempest, a birth, and death?» He astonished said: «The voice of dead Thaisa!» «That Thaisa am I,» she replied, «supposed dead and drowned». «O true Diana!» exclaimed Pericles, in a passion of devout astonishment. «And now,» said Thaisa, «I know you better. Such a ring as I see on your finger did the king my father give you, when we with tears parted from him at Pentapolis». «Enough, you gods!» cried Pericles, «your present kindness makes my past miseries sport. O come, Thaisa, be buried a second time within these arms».

And Marina said: «My heart leaps to be gone into my mother's bosom». Then did Pericles show his daughter to her mother, saying: «Look who kneels here, flesh of thy flesh, thy burthen at sea, and called Marina, because she was yielded there». «Blessed and my own!» said Thaisa: and while she hung in rapturous joy over her child, Pericles knelt before the altar, saying: «Pure Diana, bless thee for thy vision. For this, I will offer oblations nightly to thee». And then and there did Pericles, with the consent of Thaisa, solemnly affiance their daughter, the virtuous Marina, to the well–deserving Lysimachus in marriage.

Thus have we seen in Pericles, his queen, and daughter, a famous example of virtue assailed by calamity (through the sufferance of Heaven, to teach patience and constancy to men), under the same guidance becoming finally successful, and triumphing over chance and change. In Helicanus we have beheld a notable pattern of truth, of faith, and loyalty, who, when he might have succeeded to a shone, chose rather to recall the rightful owner to his possession, than to become great by another's wrong. In the worthy Cerimon, who restored Thaisa to life, we are instructed how goodness directed by knowledge, in bestowing benefits upon mankind, approaches to the nature of the gods. It only remains to be told, that Dionysia, the wicked wife of Cleon, met with an end proportionable to her deserts; the inhabitants of Tarsus, when her cruel attempt upon Marina was known, rising in a body to revenge the daughter of their benefactor, and setting fire to the palace of Cleon, burnt both him and her, and their whole household: the gods seeming well pleased, that so foul a murder, though but intentional, and never carried into act, should be punished in a way befitting its enormity.

Capitolo III

Mrs. Leicester's School

È nella riconoscibilità del racconto pedagogico che Mary Lamb decide di dare forma ai *tales* che compongono la raccolta di *Mrs. Leicester's School* (1808). Variamente formulate, le parole "scuola" e "educazione femminile" si imprimono ripetutamente sui titoli della trattatistica e della letteratura didattica della seconda metà del Settecento e la Lamb intona i suoi racconti ad un sottogenere della letteratura per l'infanzia del periodo georgiano, *the girl's school narrative*, iniziato nel 1749 con *The Governess* di Sarah Fielding. *Mrs. Leicester's School*, però, propone l'interrogazione, implicita e sottesa, tipica del periodo romantico, sulle forme e le narrazioni convenzionali entro cui si ascrive l'opera, nonché sul canone, in questo caso della *children's literature*, che si rivisita con un'idea di rinnovamento. Già la presunta *governess*, la signora Leicester, resta solo nome di una istituzione, ingombra l'altisonante titolo senza trasformarsi in personaggio o, meglio, in voce edificante per delle giovinette.

Liberare i libri per ragazzi dalla guisa esclusivamente moralizzante fu il principio ispiratore della produzione non solo di Mary Lamb, ma anche del fratello Charles, prima di tutto sostanziando i *tales*, quelle storie brevi e didattiche di gran parte della letteratura per l'infanzia scritte prevalentemente da donne, di una moderna esperienza di lettura per i bambini–lettori, posti per la prima volta all'ascolto di un'autonoma coscienza infantile che si autorappresenta. I racconti della Lamb si impongono, pertanto, come un punto di snodo fondamentale per la cultura

letteraria inglese grazie ai quali il *tale* subisce i primi segni di trasformazione verso la moderna *short story*.

In *Mrs. Leicester's School* è anche scritta la storia letteraria e culturale della letteratura per l'infanzia in Inghilterra. Innanzitutto è ribadito quel convincimento che fu di John Newbery che l'insegnamento ideale dovesse passare attraverso la lettura e la letteratura e che l'educazione fornita dai libri per l'infanzia è pietra angolare nella formazione degli individui. Nei racconti della Lamb, di libri ce ne sono molti e occupano un'importante presenza materiale. I libri vengono regalati, comprati, negati, fatti a pezzi o scoperti in biblioteche polverose e abbandonate, ma soprattutto vengono letti dalle fanciulle–protagoniste dei racconti, impegnate nell'alfabetizzazione o nell'iniziazione alla lettura letteraria. Margaret Green nel racconto *The Young Mahometan* è lettrice compulsiva, ha indebolito la vista per il troppo leggere. Contrae persino una forte febbre per eccesso di lettura. Il suo «piacere proibito» è coltivato in solitudine, nelle stanze segrete della casa, rispetto al compito quotidiano, il «daily task», somministrato a piccole dosi dalla propria madre, che prevede la lettura della Bibbia di famiglia stampata a grandi caratteri a cui segue il compito di ricamo della durata di mezz'ora. Gli "occhi" delle fanciulle che scrutano e sbirciano in libri e libroni passano in rassegna l'evoluzione nell'editoria: dai vecchi in–folio dal severo aspetto e dai caratteri antichi e scuri in cui si imbatte Margaret ai nuovi formati adatti ai giovani che suscitano in Elizabeth una "visione piacevole" mentre vede svolazzare graziose copertine colorate e allegre figure dai libri appena acquistati che si sparpagliano per terra.

E c'è anche il mercato librario. Si entra nelle librerie per acquistare i libri. Emily Barton fa visita con i propri genitori alla *Juvenile Library* in Skinner Street a Londra, la libreria per ragazzi di William e Mary Jane Godwin. I coniugi Godwin ebbero il merito di iniziare Mary Lamb alla carriera letteraria pubblicando per la loro casa editrice tutta la sua produzione all'interno di un progetto ambizioso e sperimentale di editoria giovanile. Il tributo ai Godwin non esclude quello alla storica e più citata libreria londinese, fondata da John Newbery

"all'angolo di *St Paul's Churchyard*" e mantenuta di generazione in generazione dai suoi successori:«As we were returning home down Cheapside, papa said, "Emily shall take home some little books. Shall we order the coachman to the corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, or shall we go to the Juvenile Library in Skinner Street?" Mamma said she would go to Skinner Street, for she wanted to look at the new buildings there. Papa bought me seven new books, and the lady in the shop persuaded him to take more; but mamma said that was quite enough at present».[1]

La Lamb, come altri scrittori romantici, desume da Newbery, oltre a fondamentali orientamenti di poetica, anche la strategia commerciale di autopromozione dell'editoria per ragazzi. Con modalità autoreferenziale e metaletteraria la narrativa registra l'ampliamento del mercato della letteratura per l'infanzia e la trasformazione dei libri per ragazzi in merce. Il titolo del racconto di Emily, *Visit to the Cousins*, apertamente richiama la serie di racconti di inizio secolo sulla promozione libraria, primo fra tutti *A Visit to London* (1805) di Elizabeth Kilner. Nel capitolo *A Visit to the Juvenile Library*, la londinese Mrs Barsfield accompagna alla libreria per ragazzi *Tabart* la sua amica Mrs Sandby, venuta in visita dalla campagna, che ha espresso il desiderio di ampliare per i suoi figli la selezionata biblioteca. Il capitolo si chiude con un'accurata lista dei prodotti Tabart, essendo stata concessa alla figlia della signora Mrs Sandby la scelta di numerosi libri[2]. L'intervento della madre di Emily nel racconto della Lamb, che perentoriamente contrasta il tentativo di convincimento della libraia all'acquisto di altri libri, è un'ulteriore rimodulazione di situazioni, motivi e temi presenti nel filone dei racconti sulle "visite". La "visita" di Emily alle cugine, in realtà una lunga permanenza in campagna senza i propri genitori, è una triste parentesi del passato, una storia di

[1] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *Mrs Leicester's School*, Grant and Griffith, London 1808, p. 78.

[2] Sempre del 1805, anno in cui la letteratura per ragazzi registra un vero e proprio *exploit* editoriale, è *Visits to the Juvenile Library; or, Knowledge Proved to be the Source of Happiness* di Eliza Fenwick. Cfr. M.O., GRENBY, *The Child Reader: 1700–1840*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, *passim*.

abbandono e privazioni, vero canovaccio dell'arrivo a Mansfield Park della timida eroina di Jane Austen, Fanny Price, e del suo difficile rapporto con le cugine e gli zii che devono prendersi cura di lei e insegnarle le *good manners*. L'arrivo a Londra di Emily, invece, in una carrozza dagli effetti fatati, il ricongiungimento con i genitori e la gioiosa "visita" per le strade della città, come in una magia trasformatrice, la risarciscono delle sofferenze, dei giocattoli e dei libri negati.

Con un movimento inverso, dalla città alla campagna, si compie la vera "visita" nei *tales* della Lamb, che è quella di Louisa Manners alla fattoria della nonna in *The* Farm–House. Al contrario di Emily, la piccola londinese scopre la campagna. «[M]amma told me I should ride in a post–chaise, and see my grandmamma and my sister Sarah. Grandmamma lived at a farm–house in the country, and I had never in all my life been out of London; no, nor had I ever seen a bit of green grass, except in the Drapers' Garden, which is near my papa's house in Broad Street».[3]

Il grande "libro della Natura" annulla ogni presenza libresca. Ridestata dalla stanchezza del viaggio, Louisa può ammirare distese di campi che volano rapidamente ai fianchi della carrozza. Nell'esperienza estatica tutta infantile della "prima volta", alberi, siepi, fiori, agnelli, pecore, mucche, fino ad allora solo nominati negli inni di Watts imparati a memoria, si materializzano in «visioni incantevoli».

Seguendo l'idea rousseauiana che lo sviluppo del carattere dell'individuo alimentato dalla "lettura della natura" rende libri e biblioteche non necessarie, gli elenchi di libri del contesto cittadino fanno spazio alla serie di descrizioni naturalistiche di Louisa, repentinamente diventata attenta osservatrice del mondo vegetale, animale e dell'affiatata comunità rurale. Contrariamente, però, alla perplessità espressa dal maestro dell'*Émile*, per la fanciulla della Lamb non è necessaria la lezione dell'interprete adulto per apprendere dal libro della Natura. Perché si compia il giusto apprendimento per una mente cittadina

[3] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

educata alla società delle *manners*, Louisa è affidata alla sorella Sarah, vera fanciulla di natura che le insegna a "leggere" il mondo naturale senza pesanti istruzioni. Il linguaggio della natura è semplice, più chiaro rispetto a quanto la teoria rousseauiana ha formulato. Tra la lettura della natura e l'apprendimento può frapporsi la sola mediazione di una fanciulla più matura che conosce già gli oggetti naturali e i cicli stagionali. Nella naturalità di quel processo di conoscenza si leggono le presenze materiali, non le leggi che le governano: «Every day I used to fill my basket with flowers, and for a long time I liked one pretty flower: but Sarah was much wiser than I, and she taught me which to prefer»[4].

Sarah illustra, mostra e nomina, Louisa "vede". Per il troppo vedere – in quel libro che produce una comprensione evidente e inequivocabile del mondo – Louisa nel giorno del suo arrivo «cade di colpo addormentata», così come avviene a tutte le fanciulle protagoniste dei racconti quando si inoltrano in una esplorazione emozionale del mondo. Il sonno infantile «chiude le palpebre» e ristora dall'intensità dell'esperienza vissuta o sospende la vita attiva quando «la coscienza si perde per i suoi eccessi»[5].

È cancella, dunque, ogni guida di rousseauiana memoria e la prerogativa sempre di Rousseau che l'immagine del bambino di natura sia declinata solo al maschile. La "scuola" della signora Leicester presuppone, invece, una trasmissione femminile e autosufficiente dell'esperienza. Non si parla per le fanciulle. Le fanciulle parlano per se stesse e insegnano l'una all'altra. Nei dieci racconti[6] si ascolta solo la voce e il pensiero infantile; infatti, il sottotitolo recita: «The histories of several young ladies, related by themselves». La raccolta si apre con una dedica che

[4] Ivi, p. 21.

[5] G. SCARAFFIA, *Infanzia*, Sellerio, Palermo 2013, pp. 14–17.

[6] Dei dieci racconti, tre sono attribuiti a Charles Lamb: *Maria Howe; The Effect of Witch Stories*; *Susan Yates; First Going to Church*; *Arabella Hardy; The Sea Voyage*. Di Mary Lamb sono: *Elizabeth Villiers; The Sailor Uncle*; *Louisa Manners*; *The Farm–House; Ann Withers; The Changeling*; *Elinor Forester; The Father's Wedding–Day*; *Margaret Green; The Young Mahometan*; *Emily Barton; Visit to the Cousins*; *Charlotte Wilmot; The Merchant's Daughter*.

fa da cornice ai racconti, rivolta alle fanciulle e firmata da una anonima istitutrice, M.B., che ha riordinato e messo in bella copia le loro storie di vita. L'istitutrice si eclissa dietro la penna fedele dell'amanuense che ha registrato e sistemato il materiale di quelle «conversazioni biografiche» e ha assunto la funzione di «fedele storiografa e sincera amica». Gli evidenti echi del *novel* settecentesco, con i fondamentali presupposti di poetica e gli espedienti narrativi più invalsi (la prefazione in cui l'editore assicura il lettore che il racconto che seguirà è "storia vera", perché fedele trascrizione di un racconto di vita, la firma siglata delle prefazioni, la storia narrata in prima persona) si arricchiscono della moderna lezione pedagogica delle più importanti scrittrici di fine secolo che hanno prodotto sia manuali che storie per bambini e che hanno posto al centro delle loro riflessioni la formazione e l'educazione femminile, prime tra tutte, Mary Wollstonecraft e Maria Edgeworth. Se i fanciulli imparano dall'esperienza attiva e dalle circostanze della vita, gli «useful books», dopo l'*Émile*, saranno quei testi che raccontano esperienze romanzate, ma credibili, ovvero, come suggerisce la Wollstonecraft, «original stories from real life». L'insegnamento dovrà essere trasmesso lockianamente con 'esempi viventi', con esperienze e incontri rivelatori e i precetti emergeranno gradualmente dalle conversazioni, invece che da etichette morali bruscamente proferite. Il parlare, per la Edgeworth, costituisce il moderno metodo pedagogico e in *Practical Education* (1798) specifica che gli educatori hanno necessità di ascoltare più che fare lezione, poiché dal linguaggio dei bambini si apprende e si valuta il loro stato d'animo.

Dalla partecipazione empatica dell'istitutrice M.B. allo stato d'animo delle giovani allieve nasce l'idea di far raccontare piccoli aneddoti tratti dalle loro stesse vite. Si evitino, dunque, le «fictitious tales», i racconti di fantasia facilmente reperibili nei libri. Come nella cornice boccaccesca e chauceriana, la giovane educatrice invita le alunne, estranee l'una a l'altra, a disporsi in cerchio intorno al camino per superare il doloroso sentimento della separazione dai propri cari il primo giorno dell'ingresso a

scuola e le persuade a raccontare i primi ricordi d'infanzia o episodi che le hanno fortemente colpite durante l'infanzia.

> During our first solemn silence, which, you may remember, was only broken by my repeated requests that you would make a smaller and still smaller circle, till I saw the fire–place fairly enclosed round, 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, as it enabled me to form a just estimate of the dispositions of you, my young Pupils, and assisted me to adopt my plan of future instructions to each individual temper.[7]

L'istitutrice al suo primo incarico è apprendista delle conversazioni che registra. Dalle storie raccontate formula una valutazione sul carattere di ognuna e adatta i programmi di istruzione a ogni temperamento. L'interesse per la vita interiore e il punto di vista dell'infanzia cancella definitivamente il didatticismo letterario dei *tales* morali e degli *improving tales*, dominio delle scrittrici sia progressiste che conservatrici della seconda metà del Settecento, secondo cui i fanciulli sono creature razionali, in sviluppo ed educabili[8]. Dalla progressione morale per la conquista della virtù, dunque, all'esplorazione del *temper* e *disposition*, elementi costitutivi del *character*, l'individuo. Veri punti di triangolazione della più generale forma romantica della *bildung*, il racconto della crescita. Le fanciulle rompono timidamente il silenzio per diventare eroine del proprio passato. La memoria recupera il pezzo per eccellenza mancante nel mosaico di esperienza del *growing up* e la *brevitas* dei *tales* coagula le psico–biografie su immagini infantili o episodi singoli dell'infanzia che misteriosamente schiudono le epifanie dell'apprendimento.

Lo sguardo dell'innocenza interpreta e soffonde l'esperienza più dolorosa dell'infanzia: l'assenza o la perdita dei genitori. Morti e abbandoni relegano questa galleria di orfane nella solitudine della propria coscienza. Bambine sole, senza molti lega-

[7] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

[8] Cfr. T. KILLICK, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth–Century. The Rise of the Tale*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2008, pp. 73–77.

mi familiari, specie di fratelli o sorelle, filtrano e trascrivono la realtà dolorosa nella modalità espressiva del discorso indiretto che ha sostituito il dialogo genitori–figli caldeggiato dai moderni pedagoghi. L'articolazione del pensiero infantile contiene il dolore e lo addomestica, perché si vorrebbe collocare il ricordo dell'io fanciullo in una zona libera dalle sofferenze. Persino l'analessi introduttiva del duro destino da orfana della piccola Elinor Forester in *The Father's* Wedding–Day non si inoltra in estese analisi del suo dolore: «When I was very young, I had the misfortune to lose my mother. My father very soon married again. The morning of the day on which that event took place, my father set me on his knee, and, as he often used to do after the death of my mother, he called me his dear little orphaned Elinor, and then he asked me if I loved Miss Saville. I replied, "Yes"».[9]

Alla *misfortune* non ci si ribella con rabbia. L'amaro destino è spiegato, invece, con le più semplici congiunzioni argomentative tipicamente infantili, come «and … for», «but … for». Tale è infatti la chiusura della storia di Elinor che succintamente riferisce della ferita di un'altra perdita, quella dell'amorevole matrigna, figura materna tanto desiderata, ma ritrovata e persa: «In this kind manner my mother–in–low has instructed and improved me; and I love her because she was my mother's friend when they were young. She has been my only instructress, for I never went to school till I came here. She would have continued to teach me, but she has not time, for she has a little baby of her own now, and is the reason I came to school».[10]

L'elegia per l'affetto materno è il contenuto lirismo che modula le retrospettive autobiografiche delle fanciulle. Un'assenza che si colma con la presenza simbolica di tante bambole nei racconti. Il gioco prediletto per risanare il fragile rapporto infantile con quella mancanza, quel dolore o quella morte. Elinor ne ha persino una a cui la stessa madre ha provveduto a cucire gli abiti prima della sua morte. Ed è solita sedere davanti alla porta

[9] C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
[10] Ivi, p. 58.

della stanza dove l'ha vista malata per l'ultima volta e cantare alla bambola la bella canzone della mamma «Balow, my babe», imitando la flebile voce con cui la cantava lei. Nel proprio 'grembo', che vorrebbe per sé e materno, Elinor custodisce l'incarnazione di un dolore, il muto modello di trasmissione di affetti e comportamenti, la riproduzione della figura archetipica della famiglia.

Nessuno sembra accorgersi del silenzioso dramma di Elinor che si svolge come nelle fiabe dietro le porte rigorosamente chiuse e vietate. Con indosso il nuovo abito per festeggiare le nozze di papà corre alla postazione preferita, davanti alla porta della camera da letto, per «sbirciare» dalla serratura il mistero del suo dolore e iniziare il viaggio nei ricordi, perché all'improvviso le sovviene di sua madre che era solita elogiarla per l'eccellente memoria. Con la bambola tra le mani, cerca di recuperare il tenero ricordo materno, perché crede che Miss Saville possa trasformarsi in lei. L'aspetto pallido e delicato dell'ultima malattia impresso nella sua mente stride, però, col colorito intenso e gli occhi brillanti della nuova mamma nei suoi addobbi da sposa al suo primo apparire. La carrozza ridipinta di fresco, la servitù in livrea, il suo nuovo vestito di mussolina bordato di un bel merletto, i guanti bianchi delle cameriere indossati il giorno del funerale della mamma sovrappongono nella percezione infantile i rituali di vita e morte. Solo l'eccitazione estatica della piccola Elinor dovrà trasformarsi in deflagrazione emotiva e pianto per l'incompiuta metamorfosi. Il principio di realtà non ammette trasformazioni fiabesche.

Lo sguardo può registrare mutamenti solo facendo esperienza di un diverso punto prospettico per osservare la realtà. Come nella narrativa di Jane Austen, il prospettivismo è principio compositivo e, soprattutto, gnoseologico che accompagna le eroine nell'esplorazione conoscitiva di sé e del mondo. Le carrozze avvicinano ciò che è lontano (la fattoria in campagna, i palazzi nelle strade di Londra); l'apertura delle porte su uno spazio domestico rovescia l'esterno in interno; gli allestimenti teatrali rendono visibile l'invisibile (come i drammi quotidiani della sfera privata nel racconto *The Changeling*). Non ultimo, lo

sguardo infantile su una casa di bambole costruito con pezzi di legno e minuti pupazzi che riproducono le figure fondamentali della famiglia. Un mondo che è costruito secondo i propri desideri, ma in cui è difficile inserirvi.

Miss Saville apre la stanza dei ricordi per aiutare Elinor a comprendere e sanare la perdita. La stanza della mamma, vero rifugio di un dramma intimo, diviene involucro salvifico di memoria e guarigione. Nell'apprendimento del lessico per dire la sofferenza, il nuovo spazio dell'interiorità si circoscrive e si definisce nella struggente polisemia della parola *repository*, che è insieme "repertorio" dei ricordi, "tomba" di un dolore, luogo di confidenze. Nella camera della mamma Elinor è incoraggiata a raccontare tutti i piccoli eventi fissati nella sua memoria e Miss Saville, compagna di scuola della madre, promette di raccontare ogni giorno storie di infanzia della mamma. La memoria plasma la mente e educa alla realtà e al mondo. In questo modo, figure materne sostitutive delle madri guariscono le ferite lasciate aperte dall''esperienza' e guidano le fanciulle verso una maturità emozionale, intellettiva e cognitiva che è progressione dal dolore a una misura di serenità. La camera diventa la stanza dei giochi, ma anche la "classe" di Elinor dove la nuova mamma le insegna a leggere. L'apprendimento è rapido perché la lezione ben detta è ricompensata da un racconto di infanzia della mamma con contenuti e spunti istruttivi per Elinor.

La madre–insegnante è la nuova eroina del filone *the girl's school narrative*, paladina dell'educazione femminile e vocata all'*improvement* della famiglia e della società. Le tante insegnanti materne o surrogati di madri, inaugurate da Sarah Fielding, avvalorano le teorie sostenute da Rousseau e da Mary Wollstoncraft sull'inestimabile importanza del potere educativo delle madri sulle figlie. Le madri sono istruttrici dell'edificazione morale e anche dei rudimenti della lettura e della scrittura, sono responsabili della formazione del carattere così come delle prime lettere.

Se la trasmissione naturale dell'istruzione materna non è possibile, se le fanciulle non vengono mandate via di casa, in collegio, per adempiere alla propria formazione, se un sostituto

materno non è ancora giunto ad offrire un intervento benefico, i luoghi dell'apprendimento si moltiplicano in contesti insoliti. La prima orfana, Elizabeth Villiers di *The Sailor Uncle*, cui l'istitutrice dà la parola, si ritrae nel suo primo ricordo d'infanzia china sulla tomba della madre intenta ad imparare l'alfabeto dalle lettere scolpite sulla pietra. L'esercizio di memoria per annodare i fili dell'esistenza sovrappone "inizio" e "fine", la prima pagina di una vita, il racconto dell'infanzia, con l'ultima di un'altra vita all'ombra della morte. Anche Pip, nell'*incipit* più celebre della letteratura inglese, quello di *Great Expectations*, si ritroverà senza un passato ricordato vicino alla tomba dei suoi genitori. Per le orfane di Mary Lamb, come per gli orfani di Dickens, i primi ricordi si schiudono sul doloroso apprendistato della vita: l'infanzia come sillabario della sofferenza.

> My father is the curate of a village church, about five miles from Amwell. I was born in the parsonage–house, which joins the churchyard. The first thing I can remember was my father teaching me the alphabet from the letters on a tombstone that stood at the head of my mother's grave. I used to tap at my father's study–door: I think I now hear him say, «Who is there? – What you want, little girl?». «Go and see mamma. Go and learn pretty letters». Many times in the day would my father lay aside his books and his papers to lead me to this spot, and make me point to the letters, and then set me to spell syllables and words: in this manner, the epitaph on my mother's tomb being my primer and my spelling–book, I learned to read.[11]

Elizabeth è estranea alla violenta disperazione vissuta nella camera della madre morente, raccontata in pagine memorabili da Stendhal e Tolstoj e, invece, temperata con il filtro della memoria da Elinor. Elizabeth non ha mai sofferto della morte della madre perché nessuno, primo fra tutti il padre, le ha mai detto che è questione di sofferenza. La madre resta presenza vivente che l'immaginazione, e non il ricordo, ferma in una fissità celestiale. Le "visite" alla tomba sono fonte di gioia e buon umore, perché lì, nella percezione di Elizabeth, la mamma le in-

[11] Ivi, p. 1.

segna a compitare dalle lettere incise sull'epitaffio. La dislocazione affettiva situa il luogo dell'apprendimento, e quindi della lettura, in uno sconcertante *displacement* che radica il lessico scolastico al di fuori dell'ambiente domestico, diversamente dagli altri racconti che verosimilmente rievocano la consuetudine dell'epoca di istruire le fanciulle prevalentemente in casa.

L'arrivo dello zio scuote la coscienza della piccola orfana. Elizabeth vede per la prima volta sul volto di quell'uomo venuto dal mare, che si ritrova inconsapevole di fronte alla tomba della sorella, l'agonia del dolore reale e apprende la nozione di morte dal volto del padre per la prima volta in lacrime, mentre racconta allo zio della malattia e della morte della propria moglie. Il mutamento sopravvenuto con la 'visita' dello zio marinaio squarcia il quadro quieto della quotidianità familiare. La confusione e lo smarrimento si fanno collera verso quello zio che ha trasformato un desiderio ideale in dura realtà. Elizabeth, però, è assistita dallo zio mentre saggia nella sua coscienza le profonde implicazioni di quella morte reale. Il marinaio si investe del ruolo di un amorevole pedagogo avviando Elizabeth agli studi in altri modi per distoglierla dalle "visite alla mamma". Libri veri, adatti all'animo di una giovinetta, piacevoli escursioni, spuntini sotto alberi frondosi, racconti di viaggi e traversate, lunghe conversazioni, giochi, insomma, un'educazione 'estensiva' lasceranno un segno indelebile e determineranno il decisivo *improvement* nella formazione della fanciulla:

> [T]he improvement I made while he was with us was very great indeed. I could now read very well, and the continual habit of listening to the conversation of my father and my uncle made me a little woman in understanding; so that my father said to me; «James, you have made my child quite a companionable little being.»
> [H]is lessons were so good and impressive, that I shall never forget them; and I hope they will be of use to me as long as I live.[12]

Diversi sono i quadretti di *conversation piece* alla maniera della Edgeworth che fanno assaporare ad Elizabeth la gioiosità

[12] Ivi, pp. 10, 11–12.

di un gruppo familiare, compresa un'idea reale della figura materna trasfusa dalla caratterizzazione ritratta dallo zio marinaio. L'eccellenza del *character* senza difetti che la narrativa romantica tributa prevalentemente a eroi e figure maschili (compresi i giovani pedagoghi che aiutano le eroine austeniane nella formazione) ridefinisce nel primo racconto di *Mrs Leiceseter's School* il nuovo ruolo sociale e culturale della madre di primo Ottocento[13]. La ricorrente diade madre–figlia della narrativa per l'infanzia è mediata da una presenza maschile che non si "femminizza" nella sua funzione, anzi esalta e la valorizza la donna illuminata, la «excellent lady», custode di un'educazione riformata. Lo zio marinaio è ottimo maestro perché insegna così come sua sorella avrebbe fatto, benché egli stesso si reputi non all'altezza. Soprattutto si fa portavoce di una trasmissione pedagogica e affettiva grazie alla quale una madre continua a vivere attraverso la propria figlia. Miglioramento e crescita verso il *womanly character* è il cammino intrapreso da Elizabeth, avendo appreso a cosa aspirare. Con un raffronto tra il modello da emulare trasmesso da racconti e ricordi, e gli esempi concreti tratti dai comportamenti di madri e figlie osservate tra i banchi della chiesa, Elizabeth desume ciò che è adatto alla personalità femminile e al suo bagaglio di conoscenze: libri giusti, ricamo e cucito, comportamento elegante, modi ammirevoli, socievolezza.

Letture e solitudine segnano, invece, il percorso di crescita di Margaret. I libri citati dalla vorace lettrice sono i testi fondamentali del canone della *children's literature* dell'ultimo secolo. Certamente la Bibbia, ma anche il *Robinson Crusoe*. La lettura quotidiana, però, delle Sacre Scritture in *The Young Mahometan* non struttura il racconto secondo la consuetudine dei libri didattici con istruzioni religiose. Fu Anna Barbauld con le sue *Lessons for Children* (1778) ad imporre un modello di lavori religiosi, seguito da molte scrittrici del movimento riformista della *Sunday School*, che aiutavano le madri a fornire

[13] Cfr. A. RICHARDSON, *Literature, Education and Romanticism. Reading as Social Practice 1780 – 1832*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, pp. 167–170.

l'educazione morale e religiosa in modi semplici e gioiosi e ad infondere con l'analisi delle Scritture l'amore per la religione. Le "lezioni" erano dialoghi e conversazioni perlopiù tra madri e figlie. Margaret, invece, reale orfana di padre e metaforica orfana di madre, è una solitaria Robinson Crusoe, come lei stessa si definisce. La madre ha smesso quasi del tutto di parlarle per sbrigare le incombenze domestiche da assolvere per la sua protettrice. Le uniche conversazioni che Margaret ascolta sono i racconti dei lavori di tappezzeria che la signora Beresford descrive con minuzia cronologica a sua madre e che aggiungono un tassello alla storia delle professioni delle donne che ogni presenza femminile nella raccolta contribuisce a comporre, passando in rassegna tutti i possibili ruoli lavorativi dell'epoca: l'istitutrice, la cameriera, la balia, la madre di latte, la guaritrice, la ricamatrice, la sarta, la dama di compagnia. Ogni avvenimento di vita della signora Beresford fa affidamento al ricordo del lavoro posto in quel preciso momento sul telaio. Insulse sono le storie raccontate dalla voce femminile, fa notare Elizabeth di *The Sailor Uncle* alle sue compagne di classe («my own silly history»), rispetto alle storie che davvero catturano l'orecchio, come quelle raccontate e vissute con il suo Robinson, il marinaio venuto dall'oltremare. Pertanto la sua storia deve limitarsi solo al racconto di quella "visita" che ha trasformato la sua vita («[the] important event in my life»)[14].

Margaret inizia, così, la sua *female Robinsonade*, trasferendo il codice maschile dell'esplorazione e dell'avventura allo spazio femminile della casa. Le visite solitarie nell'antica residenza di famiglia della signora Beresford si spingono sempre più nelle zone remote ed inesplorate per superare i confini angusti del già noto disegnati dai limitati movimenti della padrona di casa che non si sposta mai, se non dal soggiorno dove fa colazione alla sala da pranzo e da quest'ultima al salotto dove prende il tè. Emulando le qualità esemplari di Crusoe, Margaret si inoltra al-

[14] «The long visit my uncle made us was such an important event in my life, that I fear I shall tire your patience with talking of him; but when he is gone, the remainder of my story will be but short». C. LAMB, M. LAMB, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

la scoperta di quel mondo murato preannunciato nel preambolo dalla totalità metonimica dello spazio da esplorare, «house» e «mansion». La prospettiva rovesciata dello sguardo incantato di Margaret che si muove al suo interno, cattura con avidità descrittiva, peculiare di questo racconto, gli arredi domestici delle diverse sale attraversate, le coperture e le porte che si frappongono e ostruiscono la vista, le pareti che sembrano inspessirsi e animarsi con arazzi e ritratti di famiglia. L'approdo del percorso realistico è la stanza dei desideri, una grande biblioteca. Come nei giochi infantili, la realtà non è solo quella che appare.

Sarah Trimmer aveva paventato i pericoli di emulazione dell'individualismo solitario insiti nel *Robinson Crusoe*, il libro di maggiore fascino tra i piccoli lettori. La Edgeworth, invece, in *Practical Education*, considerava quel classico per ragazzi e le sue innumerevoli variazioni e riscritture una lettura più consona alla quotidianità domestica delle fanciulle, perché in esso avrebbero ravvisato più dei ragazzi il pericolo e l'impossibilità di errare per il gran mondo.

Nella grande biblioteca, Margaret condivide con Robinson la disobbedienza genitoriale e l'incontro con l'altro. L'oblio dei dialoghi familiar' e delle guide parentali conducono allo sconfinamento nei mondi perigliosi dell'immaginazione.

> I knew it was very wrong to read any book without permission to do so. If my time were to come over again, I would go and tell my mamma that there was a library in the house, and ask her to permit me to read a little while every day in some book that she might think proper to select for me. But unfortunately I did not then recollect that I ought to do this: the reason of my strange forgetfulness might be, that my mother, following the example of her patroness, had almost wholly discontinued talking to me. I scarcely ever heard a word addressed to me from morning to night. If it were not for the old servants saying, «Good morning to you, Miss Margaret», as they passed me in the long passages, I should have been the greatest part of the day in as perfect a solitude as Robinson Crusoe.[15]

[15] Ivi, p. 64.

Un libro in particolare, avvincente quanto una *fairy tale*, cattura l'attenzione, *Mahometism Explained*, una "storia falsa" su Abramo e i suoi discendenti che Margaret crede "vera" («I believed every word I read»). La lettura le avvicina qualcosa di estraneo al mondo infantile e l'eccitata fantasmagoria trasmuta i recinti protetti della quotidianità in abissi senza fondo in cui si può precipitare. Quel gioco solitario sdoppia il reale e procura a Margaret terrore e ansia per cui avrà bisogno di un medico che la curi dalla forte febbre e di una guaritrice che le insegni ad interpretare le storie lette e si prenda cura della sua 'malattia'. Dopo il sonno, al risveglio, vera cesura di ogni racconto, davvero la quotidianità può trasformarsi nell'oggetto voluto. I curatori dell'animo, il medico e sua moglie, conducono in carrozza Margaret ad una fiera e offrono alla solitaria Robinson una «cheerful sight», una visione piacevole di tanti volti allegri che vanno su e giù tra le file di bancarelle piene di cose allettanti: nastri, merletti, giocattoli, dolci e canditi.

Come preannuncia la località su cui sorge la scuola Leicester, *Amwell*, l'infanzia non è tenera rimembranza o edenica irresponsabilità, è l'io da cui bisogna guarire.

Elizabeth Villiers; or, The Sailor Uncle

My father is the curate of a village church, about five miles from Amwell. I was born in the parsonage–house, which joins the churchyard. The first thing I can remember was my father teaching me the alphabet from the letters on a tombstone that stood at the head of my mother's grave. I used to tap at my father's study–door; I think I now hear him say, «Who is there? What do you want, little girl?». «Go and see mamma. Go and learn pretty letters.» Many times in the day would my father lay aside his books and his papers to lead me to this spot, and make me point to the letters, and then set me to spell syllables and words: in this manner, the epitaph on my mother's tomb being my primer and my spelling–book, I learned to read.

I was one day sitting on a step placed across the church–yard stile, when a gentleman, passing by, heard me distinctly repeat

the letters which formed my mother's name, and then say, *Elizabeth Villiers*, with a firm tone, as if I had performed some great matter. This gentleman was my uncle James, my mother's brother; he was a lieutenant in the Navy, and had left England a few weeks after the marriage of my father and mother, and now, returned home from a long sea–voyage, he was coming to visit my mother; no tidings of her decease having reached him, though she had been dead more than a twelvemonth.

When my uncle saw me sitting on the stile, and heard me pronounce my mother's name, he looked earnestly in my face, and began to fancy a resemblance to his sister, and to think I might be her child. I was too intent on my employment to observe him, and went spelling on. «Who has taught you to spell so prettily, my little maid ?» said my uncle. «Mamma,» I replied; for I had an idea that the words on the tombstone were somehow a part of mamma, and that she had taught me. «And who is mamma?» asked my uncle. «Elizabeth Villiers,» I replied; and then my uncle called me his dear little niece, and said he would go with me to mamma; he took hold of my hand, intending to lead me home, delighted that he had found out who I was, because he imagined it would be such a pleasant surprise to his sister to see her little daughter bringing home her long–lost sailor uncle.

I agreed to take him to mamma, but we had a dispute about the way thither. My uncle was for going along the road which led directly up to our house; I pointed to the churchyard, and said, that was the way to mamma. Though impatient of any delay, he was not willing to contest the point with his new relation; therefore he lifted me over the stile, and was then going to take me along the path to a gate he knew was at the end of our garden; but no, I would not go that way neither; letting go his hand, I said, «You do not know the way, I will show you»; and making what haste I could among the long grass and thistles, and jumping over the low graves, he said, as he followed what he called my *wayward steps*, «What a positive soul this little niece of mine is! I knew the way to your mother's house before you were born, child.» At last I stopped at my mo-

ther's grave, and pointing to the tombstone, said, «Here is mamma!» in a voice of exultation, as if I had now convinced him that I knew the way best. I looked up in his face to see him acknowledge his mistake; but oh! what a face of sorrow did I see! I was so frightened, that I have but an imperfect recollection of what followed. I remember I pulled his coat, and cried «Sir, sir!» and tried to move him. I knew not what to do. My mind was in a strange confusion ; I thought I had done something wrong in bringing the gentleman to mamma, to make him cry so sadly; but what it was I could not tell. This grave had always been a scene of delight to me. In the house my father would often be weary of my prattle, and send me from him: but here he was all my own. I might say anything, and be as frolicsome as I pleased here; all was cheerfulness and good–humour in our visits to mamma, as we called it. My father would tell me how quietly mamma slept there, and that he and his little Betsy would one day sleep beside mamma in that grave; and when I went to bed, as I laid my little head on the pillow, I used to wish I was sleeping in the grave with my papa and mamma; and in my childish dreams I used to fancy myself there; and it was a place within the ground, all smooth, and soft, and green. I never made out any figure of mamma, but still it was the tombstone, and papa, and the smooth green grass, and my head resting upon the elbow of my father.

How long my uncle remained in this agony of grief I know not: to me it seemed a very long time; at last he took me in his arms, and held me so tight that I began to cry, and ran home to my father and told him that a gentleman was crying about mamma's pretty letters.

No doubt it was a very affecting meeting between my father and my uncle. I remember that it was the very first day I ever saw my father weep; that I was in sad trouble, and went into the kitchen and told Susan, our servant, that papa was crying; and she wanted to keep me with her, that I might not disturb the conversation; but I would go back to the parlour to *poor papa*, and I went in softly and crept between my father's knees. My uncle offered to take me in his arms, but I turned sullenly from

him, and clung closer to my father, having conceived a dislike to my uncle, because he had made my father cry.

Now I first learned that my mother's death was a heavy affliction ; for I heard my father tell a melancholy story of her long illness, her death, and what he had suffered from her loss. My uncle said what a sad thing it was for my father to be left with such a young child; but my father replied, his little Betsy was all his comfort, and that, but for me he should have died with grief. How I could be any comfort to my father struck me with wonder. I knew I was pleased when he played and talked with me; but I thought that was all goodness and favour done to me, and I had no notion how I could make any part of his happiness. The sorrow I now heard he had suffered was as new and strange to me. I had no idea that he had ever been unhappy; his voice was always kind and cheerful; I had never before seen him weep, or shew any such signs of grief as those in which I used to express my little troubles. My thoughts on these subjects were confused and childish; but from that time I never ceased pondering on the sad story of my dead mamma.

The next day I went, by mere habit, to the study–door, to call papa to the beloved grave; my mind misgave me, and I could not tap at the door. I went backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the study, and what to do with myself I did not know. My uncle met me in the passage, and said, «Betsy, will you come and walk with me in the garden?» This I refused, for this was not what I wanted, but the old amusement of sitting on the grave and talking to papa. My uncle tried to persuade me, but still I said, «No, no,» and ran crying into the kitchen. As he followed me in there, Susan said, «This child is so fretful today, I do not know what to do with her.» «Ay,» said my uncle, «I suppose my poor brother spoils her, having but one.» This reflection on my papa made me quite in a little passion of anger, for I had not forgot that with this new uncle sorrow had first come into our dwelling; I screamed loudly, till my father came out to know what it was all about. He sent my uncle into the parlour, and said he would manage the little wrangler by himself. When my uncle was gone I ceased crying; my father forgot

to lecture me for my ill–humour, or to inquire into the cause, and we were soon seated by the side of the tombstone. No lesson went on that day; no talking of pretty mamma sleeping in the green grave; no jumping from the tombstone to the ground; no merry jokes or pleasant stories. I sat upon my father's knee, looking up in his face and thinking, «*How sorry papa looks*,» till, having been fatigued with crying, and now oppressed with thought, I fell fast asleep.

My uncle soon learned from Susan that this place was our constant haunt; she told him she did verily believe her master would never get the better of the death of her mistress while he continued to teach the child to read at the tombstone; for though it might soothe his grief, it kept it for ever fresh in his memory. The sight of his sister's grave had been such a shock to my uncle, that he readily entered into Susan's apprehensions; and concluding that if I were set to study by some other means, there would no longer be a pretence for these visits to the grave, away my kind uncle hastened to the nearest market–town to buy me some books.

I heard the conference between my uncle and Susan, and I did not approve of his interfering in our pleasure. I saw him take his hat and walk out, and I secretly hoped he was gone *beyond seas again*, from whence Susan had told me he had come. Where *beyond seas* was, I could not tell; but I concluded it was somewhere a great way off. I took my seat on the churchyard stile, and kept looking down the road, and saying, «I hope I shall not see my uncle again. I hope my uncle will not come from *beyond seas* any more;» but I said this very softly, and had a kind of notion that I was in a perverse ill–humoured fit. Here I sat till my uncle returned from the market–town with his new purchases. I saw him come walking very fast, with a parcel under his arm. I was very sorry to see him, and I frowned and tried to look very cross. He untied his parcel, and said, «Betsy I have brought you a pretty book.» I turned my head away, and said, «I don't want a book;» but I could not help peeping again to look at it. In the hurry of opening the parcel, he had scattered all the books upon the ground, and there I saw fine gilt covers and gay

pictures all fluttering about. What a fine sight! All my resentment vanished, and I held up my face to kiss him, that being my way of thanking my father for any extraordinary favour.

My uncle had brought himself into rather a troublesome office; he had heard me spell so well, that he thought there was nothing to do but to put books into my hand and I should read; yet notwithstanding I spelt tolerably well, the letters in my new library were so much smaller than I had been accustomed to; they were like Greek characters to me; I could make nothing at all of them. The honest sailor was not to be discouraged by this difficulty; though unused to play the schoolmaster, he taught me to read the small print with unwearied diligence and patience; and whenever he saw my father and me look as if we wanted to resume our visits to the grave, he would propose some pleasant walk; and if my father said it was too far for the child to walk, he would set me on his shoulder and say, «Then Betsy shall ride!» and in this manner has he carried me many, many miles.

In these pleasant excursions my uncle seldom forgot to make Susan furnish him with a luncheon, which, though it generally happened every day, made a constant surprise to my papa and me, when, seated under some shady tree, he pulled it out of his pocket, and began to distribute his little store ; and then I used to peep into the other pocket, to see if there were not some currant wine there, and the little bottle of water for me ; if, perchance, the water was forgot, then it made another joke, that poor Betsy must be forced to drink a little drop of wine. These are childish things to tell of; and, instead of my own silly history, I wish I could remember the entertaining stories my uncle used to relate of his voyages and travels, while we sat under the shady trees eating our noontide meal.

The long visit my uncle made us was such an important event in my life, that I fear I shall tire your patience with talking of him; but when he is gone, the remainder of my story will be but short.

The summer months passed away, but not swiftly; the pleasant walks and the charming stories of my uncle's adventures made them seem like years to me. I remember the approach of

winter by the warm greatcoat he bought for me, and how proud I was when I first put it on; and that he called me Little Red Riding Hood, and bade me beware of wolves; and that I laughed, and said there were no such things now; then he told me how many wolves, and bears, and tigers, and lions he had met with in uninhabited lands that were like Robinson Crusoe's island. Oh, these were happy days!

In the winter our walks were shorter and less frequent. My books were now my chief amusement, though my studies were often interrupted by a game of romps with my uncle, which too often ended in a quarrel, because he played so roughly; yet long before this I dearly loved my uncle, and the improvement I made while he was with us was very great indeed. I could now read very well, and the continual habit of listening to the conversation of my father and my uncle made me a little woman in understanding; so that my father said to him, «James, you have made my child quite a companionable little being!»

My father often left me alone with my uncle; sometimes to write his sermons ; sometimes to visit the sick, or give counsel to his poor neighbours; then my uncle used to hold long conversations with me, telling me how I should strive to make my father happy, and endeavour to improve myself when he was gone. Now I began justly to understand why he had taken such pains to keep my father from visiting my mother's grave, that grave which I often stole privately to look at; but now never without awe and reverence, for my uncle used to tell me what an excellent lady my mother was; and I now thought of her as having been a real mamma, which before seemed an ideal something, no way connected with life. And he told me that the ladies from the Manor–house, who sat in the best pew in the church, were not so graceful, and the best women in the village were not so good, as was my sweet mamma; and that if she had lived, I should not have been forced to pick up a little knowledge from him, a rough sailor, or to learn to knit and sew of Susan, but that she would have taught me all ladylike fine works, and delicate behaviour, and perfect manners, and would have selected for me proper books, such as were most fit to instruct

my mind, and of which he nothing knew. If ever in my life I shall have any proper sense of what is excellent, or becoming in the womanly character, I owe it to these lessons of my rough unpolished uncle; for, in telling me what my mother would have made me, he taught me what to wish to be; and when, soon after my uncle left us, I was introduced to the ladies at the Manor-house, instead of hanging down my head with shame, as I should have done before my uncle came, like a little village rustic, I tried to speak distinctly, with ease and a modest gentleness, as my uncle had said my mother used to do; instead of hanging down my head abashed, I looked upon them, and thought what a pretty sight a fine lady was, and how well my mother must have appeared, since she was so much more graceful than these high ladies were; and when I heard them compliment my father on the admirable behaviour of his child, and say how well he had brought me up, I thought to myself, «Papa does not much mind my manners, if I am but a good girl; but it was my uncle that taught me to behave like mamma.» I cannot now think my uncle was so rough and unpolished as he said he was, for his lessons were so good and so impressive that I shall never forget them, and I hope they will be of use to me as long as I live. He would explain to me the meaning of all the words he used, such as grace and elegance, modest diffidence and affectation, pointing out instances of what he meant by those words, in the manners of the ladies and their young daughters who came to our church; for, besides the ladies of the Manor-house, many of the neighbouring families came to our church, because my father preached so well.

It must have been early in the spring when my uncle went away, for the crocuses were just blown in the garden, and the primroses had begun to peep from under the young budding hedgerows. I cried as if my heart would break, when I had the last sight of him through a little opening among the trees as he went down the road. My father accompanied him to the market–town, from whence he was to proceed in the stage–coach to London. How tedious I thought all Susan's endeavours to comfort me were. The stile where I first saw my uncle came into my

mind, and I thought I would go and sit there, and think about that day; but I was no sooner seated there, than I remembered how I had frightened him by taking him so foolishly to my mother's grave, and then again how naughty I had been when I sat muttering to myself at this same stile, wishing that he who had gone so far to buy me books might never come back any more; all my little quarrels with my uncle came into my mind, now that I could never play with him again, and it almost broke my heart. I was forced to run into the house to Susan for that consolation I had just before despised.

Some days after this, as I was sitting by the fire with my father, after it was dark, and before the candles were lighted, I gave him an account of my troubled conscience at the church–stile, when I remembered how unkind I had been to my uncle when he first came, and how sorry I still was whenever I thought of the many quarrels I had had with him.

My father smiled, and took hold of my hand, saying, «I will tell you all about this, my little penitent. This is the sort of way in which we all feel when those we love are taken from us. When our dear friends are with us, we go on enjoying their society, without much thought or consideration of the blessing we are possessed of, nor do we too nicely weigh the measure of our daily actions we let them freely share our kind or our discontented moods; and, if any little bickerings disturb our friendship, it does but the more endear us to each other when we are in a happier temper. But these things come over us like grievous faults when the object of our affection is gone for ever. Your dear mamma and I had no quarrels; yet in the first days of my lonely sorrow how many things came into my mind that I might have done to have made her happier. It is so with you, my child. You did all a child could do to please your uncle, and dearly did he love you; and these little things which now disturb your tender mind, were remembered with delight by your uncle; he was telling me in our last walk, just perhaps as you were thinking about it with sorrow, of the difficulty he had in getting into your good graces when he first came; he will think of these things with pleasure when he is far away. Put away from you

this unfounded grief; only let it be a lesson to you to be as kind as possible to those you love; and remember, when they are gone from you, you will never think you had been kind enough. Such feelings as you have now described are the lot of humanity. So you will feel when I am no more, and so will your children feel when you are dead. But your uncle will come back again, Betsy, and we will now think of where we are to get the cage to keep the talking parrot in, he is to bring home; and go and tell Susan to bring the candles, and ask her if the nice cake is almost baked that she promised to give us for our tea.»

At this point, my dear Miss Villiers, you thought fit to break off your story, and the wet eyes of your young auditors seemed to confess that you had succeeded in moving their feelings with your pretty narrative. It now fell by lot to the turn of Miss Manners to relate her story, and we were all sufficiently curious to know what so very young an historian had to tell of herself. I shall continue the narratives for the future in the order in which they followed, without mentioning any of the interruptions which occurred from the asking of questions, or from any other cause, unless materially connected with the stories. I shall also leave out the apologies with which you severally thought fit to preface your stories of yourselves, though they were very seasonable in their place, and proceeded from a proper diffidence, because I must not swell my work to too large a size.

Elinor Foster; or, The Father's Wedding–day

When I was very young, I had the misfortune to lose my mother. My father very soon married again. The morning of the day on which that event took place, my father set me on his knee, and as he often used to do after the death of my mother, he called me his dear little orphaned Elinor; and then he asked me if I loved Miss Saville. I replied «Yes.» Then he said, this dear lady was going to be so kind as to be married to him, and that she was to live with us and be my mamma. My father told me this with such pleasure in his looks, that I thought it must be

a very fine thing indeed to have a new mamma; and on his saying it was time for me to be dressed against his return from church, I ran in great spirits to tell the good news in the nursery. I found my maid and the housemaid looking out of the window to see my father get into his carriage, which was newly painted; the servants had new liveries and fine white ribands in their hats; and then I perceived my father had left off his mourning. The maids were dressed in new coloured gowns and white ribands. On the table I saw a new muslin frock trimmed with fine lace, ready for me to put on. I skipped about the room quite in an ecstasy.

When the carriage drove from the door, the housekeeper came in to bring the maids' new white gloves. I repeated to her the words I had just heard, that that dear lady, Miss Saville, was going to be married to papa, and that she was to live with us and be my mamma.

The housekeeper shook her head, and said, «Poor thing! how soon children forget everything!»

I could not imagine what she meant by my forgetting everything, for I instantly recollected poor mamma used to say I had an excellent memory.

The women began to draw on their white gloves, and the seams rending in several places, Ann said, «This is just the way our gloves served us at my mistress's funeral.» The other checked her, and said, «Hush!» I was then thinking of some instances in which my mamma had praised my memory, and this reference to her funeral fixed her idea in my mind.

From the time of her death no one had ever spoken to me of my mamma, and I had apparently forgotten her; yet I had a habit, which perhaps had not been observed, of taking my little stool, which had been my mamma's footstool, and a doll which my mamma had dressed for me while she was sitting in her elbow–chair, her head supported with pillows. With these in my hands, I used to go to the door of the room in which I had seen her in her last illness; and after trying to open it, and peeping through the keyhole, from whence I could just see a glimpse of the crimson curtains, I used to sit down on the stool before the

door, and play with my doll, and sometimes sing to it mamma's pretty song of «Balow my babe;» imitating as well as I could the weak voice in which she used to sing it to me. My mamma had a very sweet voice. I remember now the gentle tone in which she used to say my prattle did not disturb her.

When I was dressed in my new frock, I wished poor mamma was alive to see how fine I was on papa's wedding–day, and I ran to my favourite station at her bedroom door. There I sat thinking of my mamma, and trying to remember exactly how she used to look; because I foolishly imagined that Miss Saville was to be changed into something like my own mother, whose pale and delicate appearance in her last illness was all that I retained of her remembrance.

When my father returned home with his bride, he walked upstairs to look for me, and my new mamma followed him. They found me at my mother's door, earnestly looking through the keyhole. I was thinking so intently on my mother, that when my father said, «Here is your new mamma, my Elinor,» I turned round and began to cry, for no other reason than because she had a very high colour, and I remembered my mamma was very pale; she had bright black eyes, my mother's were mild blue eyes; and that instead of the wrapping gown and close cap in which I remembered my mamma, she was dressed in all her bridal decorations.

I said, «Miss Saville shall not be my mamma,» and I cried till I was sent away in disgrace.

Every time I saw her for several days, the same notion came into my head that she was not a bit more like mamma than when she was Miss Saville. My father was very angry when he saw how shy I continued to look at her; but she always said, «never mind. Elinor and I shall soon be better friends.»

One day,. when I was very naughty indeed, for I would not speak one word to either of them, my papa took his hat and walked out, quite in a passion. When he was gone, I looked up at my new mamma, expecting to see her very angry too; but she was smiling and looking very good–naturedly upon me; and she said, «Now we are alone together, my pretty little daughter, let

us forget papa is angry with us, and tell me why you were peeping through that door the day your papa brought me home, and you cried so at the sight of me.» «Because mamma used to be there,» I replied. When she heard me say this, she fell a crying very sadly indeed; and I was so very sorry to hear her cry so, that I forgot I did not love her, and I went up to her and said, «Don't cry, I won't be naughty any more, I won't peep through the door any more.»

Then she said I had a little kind heart, and I should not have any occasion, for she would take me into the room herself; and she rang the bell, and ordered the key of that room to be brought to her; and the housekeeper brought it, and tried to persuade her not to go. But she said, «I must have my own way in this;» and she carried me in her arms into my mother's room.

Oh, I was so pleased to be taken into mamma's room. I pointed out to her all the things that I remembered to have belonged to mamma, and she encouraged me to tell her all the little incidents which had dwelt on my memory concerning her. She told me that she went to school with mamma when she was a little girl, and that I should come into this room with her every day when papa was gone out, and she would tell me stories of mamma when she was a little girl no bigger than me.

When my father came home we were walking in a garden at the back of our house, and I was showing her mamma's geraniums, and telling her what pretty flowers they had when mamma was alive.

My father was astonished; and he said, «Is this the sullen Elinor? what has worked this miracle?» «Ask no questions,» she replied, «or you will disturb our new–born friendship. Elinor has promised to love me, and she says, too, that she will call me mamma.» «Yes, I will, mamma, mamma, mamma!» I replied, and hung about her with the greatest fondness.

After this, she used to pass great part of the mornings with me in my mother's room, which was now made the repository of all my playthings, and also my schoolroom. Here my new mamma taught me to read. I was a sad little dunce, and scarcely knew my letters. My own mamma had often said, when she got

better she would hear me read every day, but as she never got better, it was not her fault. I now began to learn very fast, for when I said my lesson well, I was always rewarded with some pretty story of my mother's childhood; and these stories generally contained some little hints that were instructive to me, and which I greatly stood in want of; for, between improper indulgence and neglect, I had many faulty ways.

In this kind manner my mother–in–law has instructed and improved me, and I love her because she was my mother's friend when they were young. She has been my only instructress, for I never went to school till I came here. She would have continued to teach me, but she has not time, for she has a little baby of her own now, and that is the reason I came to school.

Appendice

On Needle–Work

È indubbio che l'opera della Lamb abbia contribuito a una maggiore definizione di nuovi soggetti letterari fino ad allora "invisibili". I fanciulli e le donne occuperanno nelle narrazioni ottocentesche un posto di rilievo.

L'articolo di Mary Lamb, *On Neddle-Work*, esplicita tale presupposto di poetica trasformando la scrittura in atto politico. Mary Lamb volge lo sguardo in modo diretto sui diritti e il reale stato sociale delle donne denunciandone in particolare la condizione occupazionale. L'attività del *needle–work* si fa emblema di una ideologia domestica che limita l'esperienza e la conoscenza prescindendo dalle differenze di ceto e di classe perché parte integrante dell'educazione di ogni ragazza del tempo.

L'articolo fu scritto nel 1814 e pubblicato nell'Aprile del 1815 sul periodico *The British Lady's Magazine* con lo pseudonimo di Sempronia. Una volta conclusasi l'intensa stagione letteraria, non è escluso che la Lamb abbia scritto altri articoli su diversi periodici. *The British Lady's Magazine* sembra idoneo alla Lamb per una critica alle ideologie di genere del tempo e per una definizione culturale dell'identità sessuale. Il *magazine*, infatti, nasce con un intento ambizioso. L'editoriale inaugurale si pone in un solco più innovativo rispetto alla tradizione dei periodici femminili che erano soliti contenere versi e racconti "adatti" al pubblico di sole donne.

La breve disamina non può che trarre spunto dalla propria esperienza di vita. Mary contribuì al sostentamento della famiglia per undici anni con la sua attività sartoriale. Il tema,

però, va oltre il particolarmente interesse biografico. Ampia è la portata della riflessione sul *needle–work* perché tale occupazione coinvolgeva la quasi totalità delle donne. L'obiettivo dell'invettiva è destare l'attenzione sulla gravosa operosità di questa comunità di lavoratrici («the industrious sisterhood») con la speranza di rivendicare una nuova dignità lavorativa in un mercato, peraltro, in forte contrazione a causa della meccanizzazione della produzione che colpiva prevalentemente le attività lavorative delle donne e il loro valore economico all'interno della famiglia e della società.

È l'unico esempio in cui è possibile apprezzare la lucidità e la sagacia con cui Mary Lamb si rivolge ad un pubblico adulto, ponendosi, peraltro, sulla scia di una ideologia riformista e progressista e in continuità con le rivendicazioni femministe elaborate *in primis* da Mary Wollstonecraft. Il preambolo argomentativo, infatti, anticipa una presa d'atto e una denuncia sulla condizione lavorativa delle donne: «the state of needle–work in this country».

Celebre è il punto fermo della disamina: «Needle–work and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare». È un dato incontrovertibile, sostiene la Lamb, che la crescita intellettuale delle donne sia ormai in una fase di inarrestabile avanzamento, benché il più delle volte sia conquistata con fatica o contrastata dall'impossibilità di essere coltivata a tempo pieno. La maggiore occupazione femminile è necessariamente in conflitto con il miglioramento intellettuale, poiché tutte le energie potrebbero essere indirizzate a scopi più alti. L'invito implicito è quello di abbandonare tale mansione per tutte le donne che scoprano altre inclinazioni o propensioni.

Spietata è l'analisi del lavoro intensivo di molte donne esposte all'usura del fisico e all'affaticamento mentale, perché costrette a guadagnarsi da vivere con profitti irrisori. Talvolta, sottolinea la Lamb, alle attività lavorative femminili, assimilate a mansioni domestiche, non è corrisposto un riconoscimento retributivo. Il lavoro di sartoria e cucitura, al contrario, se fosse considerato in termini industriali, e non più soltanto in una

prospettiva artistica o artigianale, renderebbe più egualitaria la condizione di vita tra uomini e donne.

La trattazione acquisisce, altresì, un valore documentale con un'attenta ricognizione della vita quotidiana della donna del tempo. Così come nella *Vindication* della Wollstoncraft, il *needle* è espressione e conseguenza della repressione dei costumi femminili, anche nell'accesa rivendicazione di Mary Lamb, la riflessione sull'attività lavorativa si fa denuncia degli svantaggi di una educazione femminile inferiore rispetto a quella degli uomini e di una imperante ideologia conservatrice nei rapporti tra i sessi. Di riflesso inferiore è anche la qualità della vita, svilita dagli impegni domestici quotidiani: «For all classes, the needle was an instrument of social control that kept girls and women sedentary for hours[1]». Diversi sono gli obblighi che non consentono l'appagamento del corpo e della mente, come ad esempio, rendere la casa un luogo ospitale per mariti, padri, figli, fratelli o fare compagnia ai propri mariti intrattenendosi in conversazioni. Alle donne sono, pertanto, negate due fonti di felicità, il «real business» e la «real leisure». Rispetto alle attività lavorative degli uomini, le mansioni femminili non sono alternate a momenti di svago.

L'articolo di Mary Lamb si inserisce in un dibattito più generale sulle opportunità lavorative femminili in momento in cui l'impatto della Rivoluzione industriale aveva ridotto la possibilità occupazionale delle donne. Londra mostrava i primi esempi di attività economiche indipendenti che avrebbero consentito alle donne di sostenersi autonomamente. Mary, peraltro, è nella situazione privilegiata di poter avvalersi della crescente opportunità economica per la donna di diventare scrittrice di professione.

In una società sempre più industrializzata, la Lamb oltre a sostiene il passaggio dalla manifattura domestica al lavoro

[1] C.S. WILSON, *Lost Needles, Tangled Threads: Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor, and Lamb* in C.S. WILSON, J. HAEFNER (Eds.), *Re–Visioning Romanticism. British Women Writers*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1994, p. 176.

retribuito, non si esime dal suggerire altre strade per creare nuovi sbocchi occupazionali, individuando alcune attività che avrebbero potuto facilmente essere assolte da donne. Prende atto, però, che difficilmente la donna avrebbe avuto accesso a occupazioni considerate in quel momento al di sopra delle sue possibilità intellettive.

Mary Lamb si fa promotrice di una ideologia domestica post–rivoluzionaria che riconsidera il ruolo della donna nella famiglia e nella società e che la pone come individuo autonomo. Soprattutto individua in una diversa educazione la vera possibilità di cambiamento, nel convincimento che solo con una adeguata formazione culturale e intellettiva la donna può affrontare e contrastare nel corso della sua vita i preconcetti e i condizionamento di un ordine sociale patriarcale.

On Needle-Work

Mr. Editor,

In early life I passed eleven years in the exercise of my needle for a livelihood. Will you allow me to address your readers, among whom might perhaps be found some of the kind patronesses of my former humble labours, on a subject widely connected with female life – the state of needle–work in this country.

To lighten the heavy burthen which many ladies impose upon themselves is one object which I have in view; but, I confess, my strongest motive is to excite attention towards the industrious sisterhood to which I once belonged.

From books I have been informed of the fact upon which *The British Lady's Magazine* chiefly founds its pretensions; namely, that women have, of late, been rapidly advancing in intellectual improvement. Much may have been gained in this way, indirectly, for that class of females for whom I wish to plead. Needle–work and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare. But I am afraid the root of the evil as not,

as yet, been struck at. Work–women of every description were never in so much distress for want of employment.

Among the present circle of my acquaintance I am proud to rank many that may truly be called respectable; nor do the female part of them in their mental attainments at all disprove the prevailing opinion of that intellectual progression which you have taken as the basis of your work; yet I affirm that I know not a single family where there is not some essential drawback to its comfort which may be traced to needlework *done at home*, as the phrase is for all needle–work performed in a family by some of its own members, and for which no remuneration in money is received or expected.

In money alone, did I say? I would appeal to all the fair votaries of voluntary housewifery whether, in the matter of conscience, any one of them ever thought she had done as much needle–work as she ought to have done. Even fancy–work, the fairest of the tribe! How delightful the arrangement of her materials! The fixing upon her happiest pattern, how pleasing an anxiety! How cheerful the commencement of the labour she enjoys! But that lady must be a true lover of the art, and so industrious a pursuer of a predetermined purpose, that it were pity her energy should not have been directed to some wiser end, who can affirm she neither feels weariness during the execution of a fancy piece, nor takes more time than she had calculated for the performance.

Is it too bold an attempt to persuade your readers that it would prove an incalculable addition to general happiness and the domestic comfort of both sexes, if needle–work were never practised but for a remuneration in money? As nearly, however, as this desirable thing can be effected, so much more nearly will woman be upon an equality with men as far as respects the mere enjoyment of life. As far as that goes, I believe it is every woman's opinion that the condition of men is far superior to her own.

«They can do what they like,» we say. Do not these words generally mean they have time to seek out whatever amusements suit their tastes? We dare not tell them we have no

time to do this ; for if they should ask in what manner we dispose of our time we should blush to enter upon a detail of the minutiae which compose the sum of a woman's daily employment. Nay, many a lady who allows not herself one quarter of an hour's positive leisure during her waking hours, considers her own husband as the most industrious of men if he steadily pursue his occupation till the hour of dinner, and will be perpetually lamenting her own idleness.

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. To the execution of employments in which the faculties of the body or mind are called into busy action there must be a consoling importance attached, which feminine duties (that generic term for all our business) cannot aspire to.

In the most meritorious discharges of those duties the highest praise we can aim at is to be accounted the helpmates of *man*; who, in return for all he does for us, expects, and justly expects, us to do all in our power to soften and sweeten life.

In how many ways is a good woman employed in thought or action through the day that her *good man* may be enabled to feel his leisure hours *real*, *substantial holiday* and perfect respite from the cares of business! Not the least part to be done to accomplish this end is to fit herself to become a conversational companion; that is to say, she has to study and understand the subjects on which he loves to talk. This part of our duty, if strictly performed, will be found by far our hardest part. The disadvantages we labour under from an education differing from a manly one make the hours in which we *sit and do nothing* in men's company too often anything but a relaxation ; although as to pleasure and instruction time so passed may be esteemed more or less delightful.

To make a man's home so desirable a place as to preclude his having a wish to pass his leisure hours at any fireside in preference to his own, I should humbly take to be the sum and substance of woman's domestic ambition. I would appeal to our

British ladies, who are generally allowed to be the most jealous and successful of all women in the pursuit of this object, I would appeal to them who have been most successful in the performance of this laudable service, in behalf of father, son, husband or brother, whether an anxious desire to perform this duty well is not attended with enough of *mental* exertion, at least, to incline them to the opinion that women may be more properly ranked among the contributors to than the partakers of the undisturbed relaxation of men.

If a family be so well ordered that the master is never called in to its direction, and yet he perceives comfort and economy well attended to, the mistress of that family (especially if children form a part of it), has, I apprehend, as large a share of womanly employment as ought to satisfy her own sense of duty; even though the needle–book and thread–case were quite laid aside, and she cheerfully contributed her part to the slender gains of the corset–maker, the milliner, the dress–maker, the plain worker, the embroidress and all the numerous classifications of females supportino themselves by *needle–work*, that great staple commodity which is alone appropriated to the self-supporting part of our sex.

Much has been said and written on the subject of men engrossing to themselves every occupation and calling. After many years of observation and reflection I am obliged to acquiesce in the notion that it cannot well be ordered otherwise.

If, at the birth of girls, it were possible to foresee in what cases it would be their fortune to pass a single life, we should soon find trades wrested from their present occupiers and transferred to the exclusive possession of our sex. The whole mechanical business of copying writings in the law department, for instance, might very soon be transferred with advantage to the poorer sort of women, who, with very little teaching, would soon beat their rivals of the other sex in facility and neatness. The parents of female children who were known to be destined from their birth to maintain themselves through the whole course of their lives with like certainty as their sons are, would feel it a duty incumbent on themselves to strengthen the minds,

and even the bodily constitutions, of their girls so circumstanced, by an education which, without affronting the preconceived habits of society, might enable them to follow some occupation now considered above the capacity, or too robust for the constitution of our sex. Plenty of resources would then lie open for single women to obtain an independent livelihood, when every parent would be upon the alert to encroach upon some employment, now engrossed by men, for such of their daughters as would then be exactly in the same predicament as their sons now are. Who, for instance, would lay by money to set up his sons in trade, give premiums and in part maintain them through a long apprenticeship; or, which men of moderate incomes frequently do, strain every nerve in order to bring them up to a learned profession; if it were in a very high degree probable that, by the time they were twenty years of age, they would be taken from this trade or profession, and maintained during the remainder of their lives by the *person whom they should marry*. Yet this is precisely the situation in which every parent whose income does not very much exceed the moderate, is placed with respect to his daughters.

Even where boys have gone through a laborious education, superinducing habits of steady attention accompanied with the entire conviction that the business which they learn is to be the source of their future distinction, may it not be affirmed that the persevering industry required to accomplish this desirable end causes many a hard struggle in the minds of young men, even of the most hopeful disposition? What, then, must be the disadvantages under which a very young woman is placed who is required to learn a trade, from which she can never expect to reap any profit, but at the expense of losing that place in society to the possession of which she may reasonably look forward, inasmuch as it is by far the most *common lot*, namely, the condition of a *happy* English wife?

As I desire to offer nothing to the consideration of your readers but what, at least as far as my own observation goes, I consider as truths confirmed by experience, I will only say that,

were I to follow the bent of my own speculative opinion, I should be inclined to persuade every female over whom I hoped to have any influence to contribute all the assistance in her power to those of her own sex who may need it, in the employments they at present occupy, rather than to force them into situations now filled wholly by men. With the mere exception of the profits which they have a right to derive by their needle, I would take nothing from the industry of man which he already possesses.

'A penny saved is a penny earned,' is a maxim not true unless the penny be saved in the same time in which it might have been earned. I, who have known what it is to work for *money earned*, have since had much experience in working for *money saved*; and I consider, from the closest calculation I can make, that a *penny saved* in that way bears about a true proportion to a *farthing earned*. I am no advocate for women who do not depend on themselves for subsistence, proposing to themselves to *earn money*. My reasons for thinking it not advisable are too numerous to state – reasons deduced from authentic facts and strict observations on domestic life in its various shades of comfort. But if the females of a family *nominally* supported by the other sex find it necessary to add something to the common stock, why not endeavour to do something by which they may produce money *in its true shape*?

It would be an excellent plan, attended with very little trouble, to calculate every evening how much money has been saved by needle-work *done in the family*, and compare the result with the daily portion of the yearly income. Nor would it be amiss to make a memorandum of the time passed in this way, adding also a guess as to what share it has taken up in the thoughts and conversation. This would be an easy mode of forming a true notion and getting at the exact worth of this species of *home* industry, and perhaps might place it in a different light from any in which it has hitherto been the fashion to consider it.

Needle–work taken up as an amusement may not be altogether unamusing. We are all pretty good judges of what

entertains ourselves, but it is not so easy to pronounce upon what may contribute to the entertainment of others. At all events, let us not confuse the motives of economy with those of simple pastime. If *saving* be no object, and long habit have rendered needle-work so delightful an avocation that we cannot think of relinquishing it, there are the good old contrivances in which our grand–dames were wont to beguile and lose their time – knitting, knotting netting, carpet–work, and the like ingenious pursuits – those so often praised but tedious works which are so long in the operation that purchasing the labour has seldom been thought good economy. Yet, by a certain fascination, they have been found to chain down the great to a self-imposed slavery, from which they considerately or haughtily excused the needy. These may be esteemed lawful and lady–like amusements. But, if those works more usually denominated useful yield greater satisfaction, it might be a laudable scruple of conscience, and no bad test to herself of her own motive, if a lady who had no absolute need were to give the money so saved to poor needle–women belonging to those branches of employment from which she has borrowed these shares of pleasurable labour.

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DONNE NELLA STORIA

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