

# Stylistic Effects of Parentheses and Dashes as Paratexts in *Essays of Elia*

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The distinctive style of Charles Lamb's essays has been interpreted in different ways—abundant allusions and rhetorical devices, quaintness and vernacular, antique colloquialism, witty humor, bitter sweetness, profound humanity, etc. Nevertheless, so far the extensive use of parentheses and dashes in his representative work *Essays of Elia* has not been paid enough attention and a detailed investigation is virtually absent. This paper presents an effort to analyze *Essays of Elia* through probing into the parentheses and dashes as paratexts in regard to their stylistic effects from two perspectives—the linguistic perspective and the semantic perspective, in hope of expanding the scope of “paratext”. The major finding of the paper is that in *Essays of Elia*, parentheses and dashes as paratexts serving as stylistic markers are indispensable supplements which have special stylistic effects.

*Keywords:* style, paratext, parenthesis, dash, Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia*

## 1. Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged that style is the soul of literary works especially of essays. Charles Lamb is regarded as one of the best essayists in English literature history, who has made great contributions to the literary world. His essays with unique style have attracted and influenced many writers. Thereinto, his magnum opus *Essays of Elia* has inherited the best traditions of essay writing as well as carried his peculiar personal style which is gentle, quaint and meanwhile irresistibly attractive, with a noticeable feature, namely, the extensive use of parentheses and dashes. For example, in “All Fools’ Day” alone, a four-page short essay, Lamb uses up to fifty dashes. Moreover, almost every page of *Essays of Elia* contains parentheses or dashes, which, in some ways, have been deemed to be a reflection of Lamb's stammer (Zhou, 2018, p. 1).

## 2. Literature Review

“Style” has long been discussed both at home and abroad, which plays an indispensable role in literary works especially in essays. Charles Lamb and his essays with unique style have gained great popularity among readers. Western academics have given interpretations of Charles Lamb's essays from various perspectives, which roughly fall into two categories. Some scholars have analyzed the artificial features and literary achievements of Lamb's essays, while others have discussed about the social influence of Lamb's essays as well as the relationship between his essays, the culture background and the social context of his time. During the early twentieth, Charles Lamb's essays became the inspiration for many Chinese writers, for instance, Liang Yuchun, regarded as “Chinese Elia”, was greatly influenced by him. Later, several Chinese translations of *Essays of Elia*

sprang up with comments and criticism in their prefaces, among which versions by Liu Bingshan and Gao Jian are the most popular. However, previously existing studies are mainly about the essays' artistic features, spirits and thoughts. For a decade, the research scope has been enlarged to a considerable extent, not only confined to the artistic characteristics, but also extended to style, social context, literary culture, as well as the profound influence which British prose especially Lamb's essays have exerted on modern Chinese essayists, with comparative studies on Lamb and many renowned Chinese essayists, such as Liang Yunchun, Liang Shiqiu, Lin Yutang, etc. Recent scholars focus on the translation of *Essays of Elia*, exploring different translating techniques and translation styles.

According to Liu Miqing's "Stylistic Markers Theory", which divides style markers into two categories—formal markers and non-formal markers, those parentheses and dashes in *Essays of Elia*, which have not attracted enough attention, belong to the category of formal markers and thus have special effects on style. Since Gerard Genette coined the term "Paratext", this concept has gone through progressive evolution. All its promoters, such as Xu Dejin, Birte Christ, Dorothee Birke, Jin Hongyu and Kathryn Batchelor have affirmed the significant role which paratexts play in the whole text. Still, some scholars have pointed out the deficiencies and tried to improve the operability of paratext for literary research. Markedly, Professor Xu Dejin redefined and revised Genette's concept of paratext, proposing a different paratextual narrative theoretical framework which classifies parenthesis into paratext as an ancillary means of narration. (Xu, 2010, p. 48). Analogously, the dash, whose usage overlaps with that of the parenthesis, belongs to the category of paratext.

In consideration of the insufficiency in the existing researches on the extensive use of parentheses and dashes in Charles Lamb's essays, this paper intends to probe into whether these two punctuation marks as paratexts deserve to be called style markers as well as how they can engender remarkable literary effects reinforcing the style of the whole text narration—by exploring the stylistic effects of parentheses and dashes as paratexts in *Essays of Elia* in detail from two perspectives: the linguistic level and the semantic level.

### 3. Stylistic Effects of Parentheses and Dashes as Paratexts in *Essays of Elia*

#### 3.1 Linguistic Functions

##### 3.1.1 Creating rhythm

By paralleling several phrases especially noun phrases with dashes, or adopting a long series of dashes consecutively without other inserted punctuation characters, right pauses are put in the right places, thus diverse rhythms are created to assist the expression as well as attain a free-flowing style.

Example (1)

He must seize every occasion—the season of the year—the time of the day—a passing cloud—a rainbow—a waggon of hay—a regiment of soldiers going by—to inculcate something useful. (Lamb, 2008, p. 113)

In this sentence, seven dashes are used to connect six phrases which together turn into a flow of scene, forming a rhetorical device—parallelism. With the enhanced rhythm, Lamb reveals his attitude towards the change of teachers' roles and implies his hope for teachers. Here is another example for illustration:

Example (2)

... with the adhesive oleaginous—O call it not fat—but an indefinable sweetness growing up to it—the tender blossoming of fat—fat cropped in the bud—the cream of the child-pig’s... (Lamb, 2008, p. 42)

“A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig” is an interesting piece of writing. In order to strengthen the attractive effect, Lamb uses dozens of dashes to separate sentences into several short components, in which circumstance each fragment gives readers a mouth-watering picture, altogether producing a strong sensory stimulation at an intense pace. Similar example can be found in “Mrs. Battle’s Opinions on Whist”:

Example (3)

The uncertainty and quick shifting—a thing which the constancy of whist abhors—the dazzling supremacy of Spadille—absurd as she justly observed—nobility of the Aces;—the giddy vanity of playing along—the overpowering attractions...—to the triumph... in the contingencies of whist;—... (Lamb, 2008, p. 72)

In this section, Lamb uses eight dashes in succession to create a sense of tension. The rhythm of language echoes with the feature of card games. Frequent intervals make readers feel the complex changes and uncertainty as well as show Mrs. Battle’s strong passion for playing cards.

### 3.1.2 Reinforcing coherence

For the purpose of coherence and fluency, dashes are often adopted throughout the passage. Another way is to connect sentences split in different lines due to some rhetorical purposes with a dash or two. For instance, in “The South-Sea House”, Lamb uses 79 dashes and 18 pairs of parentheses as connectives—almost every paragraph has at least one dash. Similarly, in “Old China”, there are 17 “—and” as well as a lot of “—or” “—but” and dashes in the words of Lamb’s sister, which create an unbroken narrative atmosphere.

Example (4)

This was once a house of trade... scattered into air at the blast of the breaking of that famous BUBBLE.—  
Such is the SOUTH-SEA HOUSE. (Lamb, 2008, p. 98)

After a brief review of the past south-sea house, a dash is added to the end of the paragraph to naturally draw forth the concluding sentence. The dash serves as the connective to make the transition coherent.

Example (5)

Whom next shall we summon from the dusty dead... Henry Man...—  
A little less facetious, and a great deal more obstreperous, was rattle headed Plumer...—  
Not so sweetly sang Plumer as thou sangest, pastoral M... (Lamb, 2008, pp. 104-106)

In the latter part of “The South-Sea House”, Lamb recollects many of his old friends. Each paragraph is the depiction of different figures. The dash at the end of each paragraph replaces the transitional sentence, concisely linking up all the characters together without verbosity.

### 3.1.3 Complementing content

By means of parentheses and dashes, new information is constantly added to the text. With those insertions, the form becomes appropriate to the content. For example, in “My First Play”, the pieces of childhood memory revive with the aid of parentheses and dashes.

Example (6)

It was followed by a pantomime, called Lun’s Ghost—a satiric touch, I apprehend, upon Rich, not long since dead—but to my apprehension (too sincere for satire), Lun was as remote a piece of antiquity as Lud—the father of a line

of Harlequins—transmitting his dagger of lath (the wooden sceptre) through countless ages... So Harlequins (thought I) look when they are dead. (Lamb, 2008, pp. 134-135)

This text is a representative expression of Lamb's reminiscent feeling, where the form identifies and echoes with the content. From the perspective of the form, it is composed of several fragments as well as much additional information. As to the content, all the recollections are slices of life, full of supplementary details.

#### Example (7)

Farewell with all that made sickness pompous—the spell that hushed the household—the desert-like stillness...—the mute attendance—the inquiry by looks—the softer delicacies—the sole and single eye...—world-thoughts excluded—a world unto himself—his own theatre—What a speck he dwindled into! (Lamb, 2008, p. 169)

This example is extracted from “The Convalescent”. As one gradually recovers from sickness, he feels his fall from dignity, longing for the days when he lay ill, when he could feel his sovereignty and enjoy the quiet ministry without control. All the former privileges flashes through his mind like pictures, which are connected through several dashes, so that the form may identify itself with the content.

#### 3.1.4 Building conversations

Lamb develops his essays in a way free and friendly. His adoption of dashes, parentheses and short sentences gives readers a feeling of leisurely conversation. On the one hand, the dash at the beginning of a sentence sometimes serves as a marker to signal his communication with readers. For instance, in “The South-Sea House”, Lamb interacts with his readers like this: “He was descended,—not in a right line, reader, from the Plumers of Hertfordshire.” On the other hand, by attaching new information all along, Lamb unconsciously composes conversations to build relationship with his readers.

#### Example (8)

Reader, in thy passage from the Bank—where thou hast been receiving thy half-yearly dividends (supposing thou art a lean annuitant like myself) ...—; didst thou never observe...? (Lamb, 2008, p. 97)

At the beginning of “The South-Sea House”, by proposing a “suppose” in the form of parenthesis, Lamb tries to put readers in his shoes and lead them to see life as he sees it. The dashes build up positive connections between the text and readers, serving as a catalyst of shortening the distance between readers and the writer himself. It seems that Lamb is chattering with his readers, without the slightest arrogance or self-conceit. In such a relaxing atmosphere, a discursive and flexible style is thus created.

#### Example (9)

Trace it then to its lucky landing—at Lyons shall we say?—I have not the map before me—jostled upon four men's shoulders—baiting at this town—stopping to refresh at another village—waiting a passport here, a license there. (Lamb, 2008, p. 127)

“Distant Correspondents” gives a candid emergence of Lamb's personal feelings. The example above means to state that friendship is just like the sailor's adventure, full of ups and downs. Lamb narrates the journey with dashes all along, which seems like he is telling his readers about his experiences.

### 3.2 Semantic Functions

#### 3.2.1 Producing humor

Charles Lamb is an undisputed master of humor. When reading his essays, readers may always find themselves laughing with moist eyes. This is because Lamb's humor is not the humor in the ordinary sense. His humor is some kind of banter instead of satire, sometimes with life philosophy hidden between the lines. Using dashes and parentheses is an approach to the humor effects, which in most cases finds expression in insertion.

Example (10)

—directors seated in form on solemn days (to proclaim a dead dividend) (Lamb, 2008, p. 97)

This sentence is selected from the early part of “The South-Sea House”, describing the faded commercial house. The action within the pair of parentheses creates a sharp contrast to the front—normally, directors seated solemnly are to discuss and declare a positive resolution, not always to “proclaim a dead dividend”. By making this contrast, the humorous effect is naturally generated; while in the meantime it engenders a feeling of bitterness toward the decayed old house.

Example (11)

Layers of dust have accumulated (a superfetation of dirt!) upon the old layers. (Lamb, 2008, p. 98)

—taking no more thought than lilies! What contempt for money—accounting it (yours and mine especially) no better than dross. (Lamb, 2008, p. 29)

The first sentence is a similar example from “The South-Sea House”. By inserting a parenthetical phrase with exaggeration, the defamiliarization inspires humor to a ridiculous extent. The second is from “The Two Races of Men”. Lamb presents his unique humor through the vivid incisive description of the cheeky borrowers. Between the dashes and parentheses, there is a sly humor, with drollery while without venomous mockery.

#### 3.2.2 Strengthening emotion

The use of dashes and parentheses is right for the expression of strong emotions, which may find its manifestation in the following ways: parallelism; insertion; emphasis; consecutive use.

Example (12)

—to pursue him in imagination...—to shudder with the idea that “he must be lost forever!”—to revive at hearing his feeble shout—and then (O fullness of delight) running out of doors... (Lamb, 2008, p. 148)

This is a psychological description of Lamb's encounter with the young sweeper. Four dashes and a pair of parentheses connect a series of actions which vividly show the writer's worry and his delight when seeing the young sweeper in safety.

Example (13)

I wish the good old times would come again... When we coveted a cheap luxury (and, O! how much ado I had to get you to consent in those times!) (Lamb, 2008, p. 11)

In “Old China”, there are parentheses even in direct speech, which fully reveal the nostalgia of Lamb's sister: The strong feeling is expressed through a mild tone, implying the lifestyle of consumerism should be seriously

introspected. As such, it can be seen that Lamb's reminiscence is "not in fact a retreat from reality, but rather a knowing articulation of society (Harriman-Smith, 2015, p. 554)".

Example (14)

to the high and rushing tide of greasy citizenry—  
—Look  
Upon that poor and broken bankrupt there. (Lamb, 2008, p. 140)  
... those blind Tobit that used to line the wall... with their dog guide at their feet,—whither are they fled? (Lamb, 2008, p. 141)

In the former instance, a dash leads to a single word "Look", which indicates the writer's strong appealing for people not to treat the beggars with indifference any longer. The latter one uses a dash to mark the transition, which shows Lamb's sympathy for the beggars and makes it thought-provoking.

### 3.2.3 Revealing attitude

Based on James May's definition of criticism—the reaction of an individual mind to the thing contemplated, Fenderson (1964) believes that all Lamb's works can be considered critical and *Essays of Elia* is a reservoir of his more mature criticism (p. 237). In addition to the deep emotion of nostalgia and reminiscence, Lamb takes an entirely different stance from those who hold stereotype of the underprivileged. He always has his heart filled with love and compassion towards the poor and the miserable. "He records his sympathies and antipathies on a great variety of topics, expressing his judgment spontaneously. (Fenderson, 1964, pp. 235-236)" Nevertheless, Lamb seldom expresses his attitude directly; instead, with intimations. "An intimation is a hint, but a hint of something important. (Duff, 2012, p. 132)"

Example (15)

—the poor gentry, not having wherewithal to buy or hire a book, filch a little learning at the open stalls—the owner, with his hard eye, casting envious looks at them all the while... (Lamb, 2008, p. 8)

In "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading", Lamb presents a class of street-readers: Before the dash are the poor readers desiring knowledge, after the dash is the unkind owner, thus forming a sharp contrast, behind which is Lamb's deep sympathy for those readers.

Example (16)

I have a kindly yearning towards these dim specks—poor blots—innocent blackness—I reverence these young Africans—who sport their cloth without assumption—and from their little pulpits (the tops of chimneys). (Lamb, 2008, p. 148)

This is another example excerpted from "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers". By adopting dashes without a break, Lamb introduces the invisible sweepers into the sight of the whole society without contempt but sympathy and praise.

### 3.2.4 Adjusting expectancy

Since the dashes and parentheses are paratexts, if they were deleted, the integrity of the content might not be destroyed. But why Lamb is apt to use them in his narration? As stated earlier, readers may have their own interpretations with certain paratexts. However, what Gerard Genette (1997) requires is not the productive

interpretations, but the “somewhat remote control” (p. 348). In another word, paratexts should be consistent with the author’s instructions and purposes.

It can be seen that in *Essays of Elia*, Charles Lamb makes explanations to his readers carefully. By virtue of these signal marks, we cannot but give attention to the content after the dash or within the parentheses. He seems to hide somewhere between the lines, and as long as the reader is confused, he will at once show up to explain. Subconsciously, we focus and think more over where he wants us to pay much attention. In this way, the readers’ expectancy is adjusted all the time, so that the writer remains in a dominant position throughout their reading.

#### Example (17)

Begin a reformation, and custom will make it easy. But what if the beginning be dreadful—the first steps not like climbing a mountain but going through fire—what if the whole system must undergo a change violate as...—what if a process... to be gone through? (Lamb, 2008, p. 19)

To describe the difficulty of abstinence in “Confessions of a Drunkard”, Lamb uses several dashes to adjust the readers’ expectancy by indefatigably putting forward assumptions. In the meantime, a discursive style is made by several shifts in readers’ minds. Along with the application of repetition and rhetorical questions, the dashes bring pressure. It seems that the narrator is querying you but you have no retort and cannot give any reasonable answer.

### 4. Conclusion

Parentheses and dashes as paratexts have profound stylistic effects from both linguistic level and semantic level, which enable us to make sense of the vivid languages, the underlying meanings as well as the unique style of *Essays of Elia*. From the perspective of linguistic level, appropriate arrangements of parentheses and dashes contribute to creating diverse rhythms, reinforcing content coherence, building colloquial conversations as well as making the form and the content complement each other. From the perspective of semantic significance, parentheses and dashes help to produce humor, strengthen emotion, reveal attitude and adjust expectancy, so as to build relationships and psychological emotional resonances with readers, all of which are conducive to the expression of the unique style of Lamb’s essays.

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