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*SHELLEY'S EARLY FICTION IN RELATION TO HIS POETICS AND HIS POLITICS:
AN ASSESSMENT*

Not waiting to see the event of his victory

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PhD

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September 2012

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Preface & Acknowledgements

In terms of the winds of change which are blowing around the world, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street to the crisis of the Euro and Greek sovereignty, to the electoral reforms with Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, not to mention the terrific natural and nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011 in Northern Japan and the successful landing of the Rover, Curiosity, on Mars on August 5, 2012, Percy Bysshe Shelley is relevant. All of these events can be better understood by reading Shelley, and yet he is a man who remains deeply enigmatic. Many studies of Shelley's poetry and prose, even in the present era, begin with a statement which stresses the way in which he is undervalued. It would seem that the time is ripe for a deeper appreciation of this Poet, and the author of this study yearns to be a part of that and to make a contribution to it.

This is the first ever major study of *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* as they relate to Percy Bysshe Shelley's later writings. The doctoral thesis has come to fruition in its current form thanks to the excellence, patience and dedicated guidance of my co-supervisors, Richard Cronin and Nigel Leask. In addition to Professors Cronin and Leask, I have John Coyle, the head of the English Literature Department, Alex Benchimol, the postgraduate convenor during the first three years of my studies, Christine Ferguson, the subsequent postgraduate convenor, and the Dean of Graduate Studies of the College of Arts, Deirdre Heddon, to thank for the fact that I have been able to proceed as far as I have. It is to them that I owe the deepest debt of gratitude. Their forward-thinking approach and spirit of generosity are as beacons in the storm. It is hoped that the following document will lend credence to their having faith in me.

I received a Scotland-USA scholarship for £2,000 in 2008, the first year of my postgraduate studies, and the only external funding ever awarded to me. I am thrilled to have their support! I would also like to extend a warm thank you to all of the administrators who have helped me with paperwork, in particular Richard Codd and Valerie Stringfellow, and all of the staff and guards who were on duty in the library most days of the year from the wee hours of the morning. Last but not least, I do not know how to express my gratitude to Michael O'Neill, Cian Duffy, and Vassiliki Kolocotroni, nor can I describe the effect that discussing my research with them has had upon me. I hope that both the spirit and the letter of their suggestions are evident in the following pages.

Dedication

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to the people of Japan, especially those of Northern Japan; to all those at Nippon Sport Science University who have helped me achieve this goal, in particular my librarians, Teruko Morita, Naomi Naito, Daisuke Takeuchi, Miyuki Nakashima and Yoshiya Narushige among others; and to the Poet himself, for reasons which Harriet Shelley expresses so well, setting the tone beautifully:

Mr. Shelley continues perfectly well, and his Poem of 'Queen Mab' is begun [apparently, to be printed], tho' it must not be published under pain of death, because it is too much against every existing establishment. It is to be privately distributed to his friends, and some copies sent over to America. Do you [know] any one that would wish for so dangerous a gift? If you do, tell me of them, and they shall not be forgotten. Adieu!¹

Zastrozzi and *St. Irvyne* were published two hundred years ago. It is with a great sense of delight and honor that I present this thesis to commemorate those important milestones. Much of it was written in Tokyo in the wake of the nuclear and natural disaster, and in answer to a question that he left up to posterity to decide, it can be stated unequivocally from personal experience that Percy Bysshe Shelley is a Poet in the sense that he himself defined it, and a very very great one.

A Note on the Text

This work was prepared using American spelling following the *Chicago Manual of Style*, sixteenth edition (2010). In citing items in the notes, short titles have generally been used.

Although all scholarly editions of the novels were consulted, quotes are from *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*, Oxford University Press, 1986; those of the Marquis de Sade are from *The Complete Marquis de Sade*, edited by Paul J. Gillette, Holloway House Publishing Co., 1966. Both are cited parenthetically in the body of the thesis immediately following the quote.

The major editions of Shelley's poems and prose were perused, with quotations coming from various ones. For the poems (and this applies to other poets as well), each source is indicated via a footnote the first time a work is introduced, with all subsequent quotes cited via line numbers directly in the text. Prose quotations retain footnotes throughout. Letters are from the Oxford edition of 1964, edited by Frederick L. Jones.

Abbreviations

Harvard University Press = HUP
Johns Hopkins University Press = JHUP
Norton Critical Editions = NCE

Cambridge University Press = CUP
Clarendon Press = CP
Oxford University Press = OUP

¹ Harriet Shelley to Catherine Nugent, Cooke's Hotel, Albemarle street, London, 21 May 1813, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols, (Oxford: CP, 1964), 1:367-368n3.

Abstract

This thesis positions itself between two general approaches to Shelley, that of appreciating his poetics, on the one hand, and that of valuing his philosophical vision, on the other. Duffy has noted that “Shelley’s epistemological and political maturity is no longer in any serious doubt”, and he goes on to demonstrate that Shelley’s radical tendencies remained undiminished throughout his lifetime.² My findings support Duffy’s contention, and broaden it to include not only Shelley’s writings but the actions of his life. At the same time, O’Neill has highlighted the importance of exploring Shelley’s poetry for “its imaginative effect as much as its ideological or philosophical coherence”, and that approach will be utilized here as well.³ My hypothesis is that Shelley’s early fiction, in particular his two early novels, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, possess value and deserve attention, and can shed light on his poetics as well as his politics. Moreover, conducting my research has revealed issues of sexism, gender, class and feminism, all of which will be explored.

The thesis consists of four main chapters, and four lyric interludes. Chapter one deals with the novels themselves, including their association with the Gothic genre, and offers specific details concerning the delineation and focus of the thesis. Chapter two examines the novels in light of *Laon and Cythna* or *The Revolt of Islam*, raising issues of domestic happiness and familial relationships. This lengthy poem, which is frequently neglected in close readings of Shelley, occupies a starring role here. Chapter three continues the examination of the novels as pertains *The Cenci*, in addition to grappling with matters raised in chapters one and two in a more general context. Finally, chapter four scrutinizes *Prometheus Unbound* in terms of the Gothic or Romance novels and suggests a new possible interpretation. Interspersed between and complementary to the main chapters is a series of chronologically arranged lyric interludes. This organizational structure, similar to Molière’s use of interludes in *The Hypochondriac* (*Le Malade imaginaire*),⁴ was adopted because these poems are shorter and can stand apart from one another, and it was deemed more appropriate to incorporate them with flexibility into the main argument, like a moon orbiting its planet, rather than grouping them together as a single unit.

² Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 1, 202nn2-3.

³ Michael O’Neill, “A Critical Study of the Relationship between Style and Vision in Shelley’s Poetry” (PhD diss., Oxford University, Exeter College, 1980), v.

⁴ Jean Baptiste Poquelin de MOLIÈRE, *Five Plays*, trans. Richard Wilbur and Alan Drury (London: Methuen, 1982), 347-431.

Introduction

"Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous."

"Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall".⁵

Zastrozzi and *St. Irvyne* are not unlike the creature in *Frankenstein* in that they were created with enthusiasm and then spurned by their creator. For example, in a famous and oft-repeated anecdote, as relayed to Robert Browning, Shelley ripped one of the novels out of Leigh Hunt's hands when Hunt happened to come upon it in Shelley's library at Marlow.⁶ Under this influence, Mary Shelley spurned them too, as can be seen from her overview of Shelley's youthful productions which she included with her notes to *Queen Mab*:

He was a lover of the wonderful and wild in literature, but had not fostered these tastes at their genuine sources – the romances and chivalry of the middle ages – but in the perusal of such German works as were current in those days. Under the influence of these he, at the age of fifteen, wrote two short prose romances of slender merit. The sentiments and language were exaggerated, the composition imitative and poor.⁷

She then closed "this history of his earliest work" with a letter written by Shelley from Pisa on June 22, 1821 to the editor of *The Examiner* concerning a new publication of *Queen Mab* which had appeared "as it originally stood".⁸ It is a beautiful letter, which is wonderfully crafted to achieve the opposite end which it states as its primary purpose. This notwithstanding, Mary Shelley's commentary on *Queen Mab*, the novels, and other early works mentioned by her in those few pages, punctuated with Shelley's letter, have been repeated virtually verbatim, with slight modifications, by scholars and biographers down through the centuries. It is so deeply ingrained now, that to think otherwise leads to skepticism and a questioning of one's literary sense.

To illustrate, my research began as a study of Shelley and the Fine Arts. In the first year of my postgraduate studies, I did quite a bit of exploration across wider themes, one of which involved gaining a better understanding of Mary Shelley through *Frankenstein*. As part of this process, I encountered references to the two Gothic Romances, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, written by Shelley as an adolescent. I subsequently sought out these novels with a sense of shame that I had been unaware of them

⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter, NCE (New York: Norton, 1996), 66.

⁶ A. M. D. Hughes, *The Nascent Mind of Shelley* (Oxford: OUP, 1947), 30.

⁷ Mary Shelley, commentary in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: OUP, 1905), 837 (hereafter cited as CPW).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 838.

previously, and read them casually, as light train reading. To my surprise, the novels clutched me such that I could not let them go, not unlike the experience recorded by Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson when he wrote to his friend, E. M. Forster, "Shelley suddenly gripped me, I don't think as a poet, but as a visionary about life. No one who has not felt Shelley once like that can know, I think, what Shelley is. I still recover those first feelings when I turn to him."⁹ Bertrand Russell shared a similar experience, "At last, at the age of 17 I came across Shelley, whom no one had ever told me about. He remained for many years the man I loved most among the great men of the past".¹⁰ Paul Foot comments, "At last! At the age of seventeen! It took me twice as long, but it was no less exciting".¹¹

This phenomenon has also been recorded concerning performances of *The Cenci*. According to Herbert Gregson, the producer of an amateur production staged in Leeds in 1923, audience members fainted during the trial scene at every performance, and the impact upon the stage hands and actors was filled with a frightening intensity:

Which brings me to the most outstanding fact about this play—its terrific power . . . We found it impossible to rehearse in cold blood—even in the first rehearsals when we plotted the mechanics of movement and grouping, it was impossible to meander or gabble through the lines—before long we were acting with as much intensity as at a performance. One of my players said, 'The play's possessed—it grabs hold of you!' Its effect upon even hardened playgoers was amazing—one critic of many years' experience came around after, looking drawn and ill. He told me afterwards that it was days before he was free of its lingering power to flood him with temporary sickness—'Worse than anything in Grand Guignol' he said.¹²

Shelley's skill at seizing his audience has been described by a variety of people who reacted grippingly to different works. That type of response was very real for me too, but in quite an unusual way, for it was with the novels, two works that Foot does not even mention in *Red Shelley*, and which are not seen to be representative of what Shelley as a poet, writer, and radical intellectual was capable of. Miles sums up this dilemma as follows, which is particularly relevant in Shelley's case:

My present sense of the field [Gothic Studies] is that it is situated both at the margins and at the centre of 'English': at the margins, because the study of the Gothic is not primarily occupied with the best that has been thought and written, with those aesthetic concerns which constituted the canonisation on which traditional English studies were based; but at the centre, because it involves itself with those wider questions about the work of culture that have inspired much of what is innovatory in English.¹³

⁹ Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), 7.

¹⁰ Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 'My Mental Development' (Evanston, IL and New York: CUP, 1946), 8, quoted in Foot, *Red Shelley*, 12-13, 277n5.

¹¹ Foot, *Red Shelley*, 13.

¹² Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 229n135.

¹³ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A genealogy*, 2nd ed. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993, 2002), vii.

In spite of the renewed interest in Gothic studies, with it being “a common feature of university syllabuses throughout the English speaking world,”¹⁴ there is a marked lack of prestige accorded to Shelley’s early novels.

The problem of the Gothic in light of Shelley’s identity as a gifted poet, one whom Bloom, following Wordsworth, calls “*the poet proper*,”¹⁵ is not the only ball in play. The question of legitimacy, legacy, and the power of introductions, prefaces and other commentary on written works to influence their reception is a salient one and one which needs to be briefly explored here. Behrendt has thoroughly examined Shelley’s audience manipulation in *Shelley and His Audiences*.¹⁶ Perhaps what has been less carefully appreciated is that the intricately detailed and interwoven lives of the Shelley circle also form a type of audience manipulation. For example, what both Percy and Mary Shelley say about one another and their works is taken at face value, generally speaking. This is appropriate scholarly methodology, but can be problematic when a disparity emerges, which it frequently does. Repeatedly throughout my research I have come up against statements made by Shelley which it is difficult to reconcile with the novels and other early works such as *Queen Mab*. One could say that this is a natural development because Shelley wrote the novels and *Queen Mab* as a youth, well before he had reached the height of his powers. Yet evidence indicates otherwise. The question then becomes, which aspect of Shelley’s writings is the one to be believed, or to be given the weight of authority?¹⁷ I alone cannot make such a determination, but in the interest of the novels, which this thesis is based upon, priority will be given to them. They have suffered a great deal of neglect, and opening the door to the possibilities which they contain is a worthwhile goal.

In addition, the Shelleys were concerned about their legacies, both personal and professional, at times being evasive in the process. This can be seen from the baby, born in December 1818 and registered in February 1819 by Percy Shelley, but not discovered until Newman Ivey White did so in the twentieth century.¹⁸ This kind of problem is relevant because Shelley’s attitudes toward women, their education, and their role in society form the backbone of his revolutionary philosophy, and it appears that he began manifesting this in his very life, against society’s wishes. It seems as though he felt hunted, and sent out false scents to keep hostile opinion at bay. Therefore, a greater level of skepticism concerning the Shelleys’ commentary about their writing and their personal lives might be in order, a superb example of which can be seen not only in Behrendt’s work, but also in Lynda Pratt’s analyses of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s statements about their fellow Lake Poet, Robert Southey.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., viii.

¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 87.

¹⁶ Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

¹⁷ See Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 103-105; Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), 27-28 (hereafter cited as YS).

¹⁸ Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1940), 2:71-83.

¹⁹ Lynda Pratt, “Hung, Drawn and Quarterlyed: Robert Southey, Poetry, Poets, and the *Quarterly Review*,” *Conservatism and the Quarterly Review: A Critical Analysis*, ed. Jonathan Cutmore (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007), 151-164.

Finally, Shelley himself discouraged anyone from taking *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* seriously, and this has posed some special challenges for me. Not only did he rip one of the novels out of Leigh Hunt's hands, which has been interpreted to mean that he was so embarrassed about the novel that he couldn't bear to have Hunt read it, he also disparaged the novels in his letters. For example, he published *St. Irvyne* at his own expense, and when unable to meet the payment required of him, he wrote to his publisher:

I am aware of the imprudence of publishing a book so ill-digested as *St. Irvyne*, but are there no expectations on the profits of it's sale?—My studies have since my writing it been of a more serious nature. I am at present engaged in completing a series of moral & metaphysical essays—Perhaps their copy-right would be accepted in lieu of part of my debt?²⁰

This statement has been used to show Shelley's disapproval of the novel, but the letter was written to appease Stockdale in an attempt to reapportion the debt. As will be explored in the next chapter, Shelley also wrote to Godwin indicating that he had given up being a votary of romance and was now taking life seriously, thanks to Godwin's influence. This has been held to mean that Shelley was ashamed of his youthful exuberance and that he developed a social conscience thanks to Godwin.²¹

Therefore, tension occurs in this thesis because of the need to weigh the frequently contradictory statements and publications of Shelley himself. It is a delicate balancing act which has placed me at odds with the currently accepted view of Shelley in many ways, and the hurdles have not always been easy to overcome. Yet ambiguity is interesting, and is a chief component of poetry, so accepting that things may never be crystal clear is necessary. Fortunately, as I have discovered and would like to impart, the novels are a rich and wonderful source of his writing: bold, brave and beautiful. According to O'Neill, "conflict lies at the heart of Shelley's poetic achievement,"²² and the concept of conflict as concerns Shelley's writings and the events of his life are explored in my research in a new way, that is, in light of the novels. One of the main reasons for this conflict was Shelley's radical agenda, bringing his politics, particularly concerning sexism, gender, class and feminism, to the forefront.

Concerning specifics, *Alastor* is not given a separate chapter, but will be discussed throughout. The thesis begins with the novels themselves. This includes a general overview situating the novels within the Gothic or Romance framework and within Shelley's output as a whole, followed by an explanation of my approach to the intersection with the poetry. Relevant topics such as background information, plot and characterization are explored. This brings up the Marquis de Sade, whose possible influence on Shelley is discussed in detail, along with a report of my efforts to determine how de Sade's books circulated during Shelley's youth. Finally, the chapter closes out with an evaluation of Shelley's early letters to William Godwin, and is followed by an analysis of two poems from *The Esdaile Notebook* in the first lyric interlude.

²⁰ Shelley to John Joseph Stockdale, Cwmlan, 1 August 1811, 1:130.

²¹ See YS, 36, 302n111; A. J. Hartley, foreword to Percy Bysshe Shelley, *St. Irvyne; or The Rosicrucian and Zastrozzi; a Romance*, ed. Frederick S. Frank (New York: Arno Press, 1977) (hereafter cited as F1977), vi; Holmes, *Pursuit*, 103.

²² Michael O'Neill, *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (Oxford: CP, 1989), 1.

Chapter two examines *Laon and Cythna* in relation to the novels, and builds upon the foundation established in chapter one. After introductory remarks, the Gothic is discussed, in particular the issue of incest and other matters pertaining to Shelley's relationship with women. This raises quite a few theoretical and practical problems which are handled with care, including the powerful and poignant example embodied by Harriet Westbrook Shelley. Next, a textual analysis of the overlap between the novels and this poem is undertaken; in particular, dream sequences are explored, insofar as is possible due to the length of the poem. Next, issues of cannibalism are considered, along with the concept of possession. Scientific and biological matters of procreation in relation to the incest theme are contemplated, along with the Gothic 'Lost Families' motif. The chapter ends with an investigation of Harriet's suicide, succeeded by the second lyric interlude on 'Arethusa'.

Chapter three tackles many of the issues that have been raised thus far in relation to *The Cenci*. Having scrupulously tilled the soil in the first half of the thesis, the analysis at this point becomes more theoretical. The nature of male and female roles in Renaissance Italy, as exemplified by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, forms an important backdrop. At first, textual similarities with the novels are explored, followed by a discussion of central themes such as doubling, sexuality, humor, and justice. The concept of cultural relativism is central to my interpretation. 'Orpheus' is the subject of the third lyric interlude.

In the last chapter, *Prometheus Unbound*, long considered Shelley's masterpiece, is daringly compared to the novels. First, the issue of pain and pleasure is explored in relation to the Latin epigraph. Next, *A Defence of Poetry* is discussed, and Shelley's skill as a humorous writer is raised. Vicissitudes between the preface, *A Defence*, and the play are identified, confirming O'Neill's feeling that "throughout the work the reader is aware of a drive to complicate and enrich meaning."²³ This lyrical drama is then compared to *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* in terms of plot and other recurring themes. *The Cenci* has been read in conjunction with *Prometheus Unbound*, and while my work supports that, it also offers intriguing parallels with *Laon and Cythna*, indicating that, like the novels, *Laon and Cythna* needs greater integration into Shelley's oeuvre. The fourth and final lyric interlude deals with 'The Sensitive Plant' and *Adonais*.

²³ Ibid., 92.

Chapter 1 – Zastrozzi and St Irvyne

I

The novel which Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote as a teenager is indelibly attached to her name. The same cannot be said, however, of the two novels that Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote and published when he was a teenager, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. Although three modern scholarly editions of the novels exist, they remain relatively obscure in terms of Shelley's œuvre.²⁴ This may in part be because the novels deviate sharply from his later writings which are pacifist, noble, and esoteric in nature; they not only exhibit violence, torture, and human degradation, they do so with relish.²⁵ Behrendt insists that Shelley's "strong moral and social conscience" is present in these early works, and he downplays the violence, seeing both novels as furthering Shelley's "principled effort to improve the human condition."²⁶

Nevertheless, while scholars no longer need to justify their inquiries into Shelley, a taboo remains concerning the novels. This is unfortunate, for Summers, writing in the 1920s, noted that "Crude and exaggerated as these novels may be, they are important in that they already foreshadow much of the poet's later self and they clearly contain the embryo of that philosophy which found immortal expression in his greatest poems."²⁷ Behrendt adopts a defensive posture in his introduction to the 1986 edition, noting that the novels "are intrinsically interesting"²⁸ although "it has taken his critics so long to notice and appreciate them, and to recognize them for what they are."²⁹ The situation was exacerbated when E. B. Murray and his co-editor, Timothy Webb, made the decision not to include either of the novels in their seminal edition of Shelley's collected prose (1993). Murray explains that "the novels were omitted because they are available in several sufficiently well-edited texts" and that there "are no extant manuscripts or authoritative later editions of either novel."³⁰ This further removed the novels from the canon, and according to Behrendt, it "devalues" them.³¹ Statistics prove him right, for although "recent searching analyses"³² have been undertaken, the number of scholarly articles on these novels is sparse when compared to the poetry. For example, Behrendt's 2002 listing of "Critical Studies Relating Especially to Shelley's Prose Fiction" contains only eleven entries.³³

²⁴ F1977; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Zastrozzi and St Irvyne*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Oxford: OUP, 1986) (hereafter cited as B1986); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Zastrozzi & St. Irvyne*, ed. Stephen C. Behrendt (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2002) (hereafter cited as B2002).

²⁵ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 32.

²⁶ B1986, xvii.

²⁷ The Rev. Montague Summers, *Essays in Petto* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1928, 1967), 67.

²⁸ B1986, xxiii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁰ E. B. Murray, introduction to *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E. B. Murray, vol. 1, (Oxford: CP, 1993), xxiii.

³¹ B2002, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 322-324.

In a monograph on the Gothic, David Punter has examined *Zastrozzi* in relation to the “primal scene,”³⁴ and Hogle has discussed Shelley’s fiction in terms of its lack of “linear cohesion” or “linear development”, a lack which “explains a *Prometheus Unbound* as the outgrowth of such narrative struggles.”³⁵ According to Halliburton, “Like most very early productions, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* are read less for themselves than for what they point toward in the author’s later work, or for the data they furnish on such extra-literary matters as Shelley’s flirtations with atheism or the occult”. He offers a thoughtful look at the novels “as novels” and takes time “to consider the comments they make, however indirectly, on the genre in which they are cast.”³⁶

Zastrozzi was probably composed between March and August 1809, published in 1810, with *St. Irvyne* composed from September 1809-April 1810, and published in 1811.³⁷ The impact of numerous previous novels on Shelley is evident. Like most of his contemporaries, he was influenced by the current literary scene:

Thomas Medwin, describing his time at the preparatory school Sion House with his cousin Shelley, recalled the voracious consumption of Gothic bluebooks brought back to school after the holidays, and once these were exhausted, the sorties to the ‘low’ circulating library in the nearby town of Brentford in search of treasures by Ann Radcliffe or ‘Rosa-Matilda’ (Charlotte Dacre).³⁸

These stories, which at the time were called ‘Romances’, included Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), among others, and are now considered to be of the Gothic genre. As Watt has pointed out in explaining the unhistorical category of such novels, this is a relatively new classification, “the product of twentieth-century literary criticism,”³⁹ which was not in use at the time and which lumps together under the same umbrella a variety of literary styles, approaches and viewpoints.⁴⁰ Watt observes that Rosa Matilda’s *Confessions of The Nun of St. Omer* (1805) “was dedicated to the ‘very various and brilliant talents’ of Lewis”, and that Shelley was subsequently influenced by her, creating a ripple effect.⁴¹ (Matilda is now known as Charlotte Dacre, though her books were originally published under her *nom de plume*, Rosa Matilda.) Several other scholars have noted this influence, including Behrendt and Michasiw, who quotes Thomas Medwin as follows:

Percy Shelley was ‘pleased’ by Ann Radcliffe’s novels ‘but the Rosa-Matilda school, especially a strange wild romance entitled *Zofloya, or The Moor* . . . enraptured him’.⁴²

³⁴ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body, and the Law* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1998), 63-81.

³⁵ Jerrold E. Hogle, “Shelley’s Fiction: ‘The Stream of Fate’,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* XXX (1981): 79.

³⁶ David G. Halliburton, “Shelley’s ‘Gothic’ Novels,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* XVI (1967): 39.

³⁷ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 303.

³⁸ E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 152.

³⁹ James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict, 1764-1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴² Kim Ian Michasiw, introduction to *Zofloya, or, The Moor*, ed. Kim Ian Michasiw (Oxford: OUP, 1997), xxiv.

While many critics do not even mention Shelley's novels, James Watt not only notices them, but offers a hint of praise:

Compared to the mainly eighteenth-century romances which I have discussed so far, many Gothic works written in the early nineteenth century were rhetorically richer and more complex, displaying a much greater interest in formal innovation, a fascination with criminality or transgression, and a desire to complicate the romance schema of punishment and reward.⁴³

This comment applies to other novels as well, such as *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), but Watt places it shortly after mentioning *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, firmly attaching this positive comment to them. Watt differs in this regard from other scholars of Shelley's early works. Cameron is grateful when Shelley abandons this phase; for him it is "a dreary spectacle" filled with "a macabre collection of avenging demons, sinister Rosicrucians, and seductions by the brace."⁴⁴ Holmes considers all of the works that Shelley published at this point to be "lurid in the extreme". He is particularly critical of *Original Poetry* by 'Victor and Cazire': "The contents and style give a fair indication of Shelley's imaginative development at the age of 18: he could not be called precocious". Of the novels, Holmes finds *Zastrozzi* to be the "most interesting", but nevertheless to him it "is a work of pure pastiche, and draws continually – even down to names – on the novels and stories of Lewis, Mrs Radcliffe and the *Zofloya* of Charlotte Dacre. The protagonists are the standard cardboard figures of the genre."⁴⁵

To be fair, an equivocal attitude towards all of Shelley's early works, not just the novels, has been held by scholars until fairly recently. Reiman explains:

In spite of George Bernard Shaw's enthusiasm for *Queen Mab*, Kenneth Neill Cameron's admiration for Shelley's youthful radicalism, and a renewed interest in Gothic literature, "the young Shelley" has never received much respect, being treated, rather, as "Shelley the Kid." Most biographers either laughed or frowned at his youthful enthusiasms, and several editors chose to exile his early poetry – including even *Queen Mab* – to the backs of their editions under the damning heading of 'Juvenilia'.⁴⁶

Freistat concurs:

The Great Divide in Shelley studies perennially has been between *Alastor* (1816), which is generally viewed as Shelley's first mature poem, and all of his preceding work, which is usually dismissed as the juvenilia of a 'wild boy,' immature both in craftsmanship and thought. As a result, with the notable exception of Kenneth Neill Cameron's monumental *The Young Shelley*, Shelley's early work either is not

⁴³ Watt, *Contesting the Gothic*, 101.

⁴⁴ YS, 36.

⁴⁵ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 31-33.

⁴⁶ Donald H. Reiman, "Shelley Comes Of Age: His Early Poems As an Editorial Experience," *Early Shelley: Vulgarisms, Politics, and Fractals*, ed. Neil Fraistat (<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/earlyshelley/reiman/reiman.html>, 1997), 1 (accessed 1 February 2010).

seriously engaged, or is engaged in a merely cursory way, to map how Shelley grew beyond it.⁴⁷

With the appearance of the first three (out of four) volumes of the Longman series of Shelley's poetry, and the first two (out of five) volumes of the Johns Hopkins edition of the poetry, scholars at last have greater access to the early poems, as well as to various items from the notebooks. Taken together these volumes offer the possibility that "the weak spot in Shelley studies [which has been] an inadequate knowledge of both the canon and the significance of his early poems" will be overcome.⁴⁸ The novels remain outside this flowering, but this thesis places them on center stage.

It is undisputed that Shelley was a professional writer who flourished in diverse formats, including essays, pamphlets, poetry, and plays. This was evident from a young age, for as Keach has pointed out, between 1810 and 1813 Shelley "produced and got printed . . . two gothic novels, two volumes of verse, five political tracts/pamphlets, one satirical ballad, one 2800-line political-philosophical vision [not to mention the Esdaile Notebook], which Shelley wanted to gather into a third volume of political verse, and his project for a novel on the French Revolution, 'Hubert Cauvin'."⁴⁹ Cameron notes that Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, an M.A. of Christ Church, Oxford, was "clearly a little startled by the phenomenon of a freshman producing, within his first few months, two books of poems, a novel, and a pamphlet, and engaging in a 'free speech' campaign. . . . Shelley had made his mark on the intellectual atmosphere of Oxford."⁵⁰ Holmes agrees that "One can speak of Shelley as a writer in the most comprehensive sense: poet, essayist, dramatist, pamphleteer, translator, reviewer and correspondent."⁵¹ It is noteworthy that 'novelist' does not apply. However, Behrendt notes that in letters written to Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley describes *Hubert Cauvin* in 1813 as being 200 pages long and still in progress;⁵² moreover, it appears that Shelley wrote an additional novel which he wanted Henry Fuseli to illustrate, *The Nightmare*.⁵³ Both *The Nightmare* and *Hubert Cauvin* have, regrettably, been lost, but this notwithstanding, Shelley's novelistic output was formidable from the start, all of these being written before he was twenty-one.

Perhaps it is natural that Shelley would try his hand at the Romance novel early on, having ravenously read the so-called blue books in what Holmes dryly concedes to be "a grand vindication of the educational powers of the Minerva Press."⁵⁴ Written during a carefree phase of Shelley's life, after he had adjusted to life at Eton and prior to his expulsion from Oxford, he had the freedom to explore ideas from a relatively unconstrained vantage point. He was not yet cast out on the world to run from his debts; nor was he yet a married man and a father. Apparently Shelley himself became ashamed of the novels within a couple of years, as Cameron describes:

⁴⁷ Neil Fraistat, "The Return of the 'Wild Boy'; or, Reading Early Shelley," *Early Shelley*, 1.

⁴⁸ Reiman, "Shelley Comes Of Age," *Early Shelley*, 1-2.

⁴⁹ William Keach, "Young Shelley," *Early Shelley*, 2.

⁵⁰ *YS*, 21-22.

⁵¹ Holmes, *Pursuit*, ix-x.

⁵² B2002, 42.

⁵³ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 31.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

he wrote largely with his tongue in his cheek – delighting, at times, in parodying his own style – aware, as he was writing the novels, of their inherent ridiculousness, but interested in a quick, schoolboy fame. Less than two years later he was apologetically describing them as ‘distempered’ and ‘unoriginal,’ the product of an ‘intellectual sickness.’ They have interest only as illustrating the early development of a great poet.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Shelley’s subsequent disapproval could be because they were an early attempt at writing, not necessarily because he had disregarded, outgrown or wearied of the themes he explored in them. In any case, it is difficult to imagine Shelley involved in an act of writing that was not relevant to him in some way, and that did not engage his intellect sufficiently to satisfy himself. Shelley was mischievous and had a vibrant sense of humor, but is it possible that these works were merely a joke written to impress his friends? He was not one to crave the approval of others. Can they be extremely immature, coming so soon before his expulsion, his unwavering commitment to independence, his marriage and fatherhood? Several scholars, including Frank, Behrendt and Watt, do not think so.

According to Fraistat, the early works demonstrate that Shelley was “capable, virtually from the start, of writing polished verse in a range of stylistic registers,”⁵⁶ and Reiman mentions that, in the course of preparing Volume One of the Johns Hopkins series, “Shelley’s earliest, least sophisticated poems . . . turn out to be much more interesting psychologically, intellectually, and aesthetically” than expected.⁵⁷ It would seem that the novels, to which he was so dedicated at that point, would also have merit. Cameron attributes Godwin with giving Shelley a sense of purpose,⁵⁸ based on a letter that Shelley wrote to Godwin on January 10, 1812:

It is now a period of more than two years since first I saw your inestimable book on ‘Political Justice’; it opened to my mind fresh & more extensive views, it materially influenced my character, and I rose from its perusal a wiser and a better man. – I was no longer the votary of Romance; till then I had existed in an ideal world; now I found that in this universe of ours was enough to excite the interest of the heart, enough to employ the discussions of Reason. I beheld in short that I had duties to perform.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, *Zastrozzi* may have been written before his exposure to Godwin (the timing of when Shelley first read Godwin will be discussed later in this chapter), and it reveals that, while enthusiastically fitting into the parameters required of this diverse genre, Shelley already had a strong social conscience. He manifests it in an oblique and playful way at times, but it is there.

As Murphy pointed out in 1975, “Cameron and most other scholars have too completely disassociated the young from the mature Shelley. . . . Though there is some justification for this view, it

⁵⁵ YS, 28.

⁵⁶ Fraistat, “Return of the ‘Wild Boy’,” *Early Shelley*, 1.

⁵⁷ Reiman, “Shelley Comes Of Age,” *Early Shelley*, 8.

⁵⁸ YS, 36.

⁵⁹ Shelley to William Godwin, Keswick, 10 January 1812, 1:227-228.

is, finally, too restrictive and disregards a major means of understanding Shelley more completely than we do at present.”⁶⁰ In 1977, Frank remarked in a similar vein:

Until very recently, critical opinion of Shelley’s Gothic novels has been condescending and almost universally adverse. Even those literary historians who were sympathetic to the Gothic extremes of Romanticism habitually dismissed *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* as worthless juvenilia quite beneath the attentions of any reader of serious taste.⁶¹

Yet Murphy’s approach has not taken hold, and Frank’s appreciation of the novels has not been shared. Twenty-five years later, in 2002, Behrendt reported that the situation remained much the same: “Percy Shelley’s prose fiction has historically been minimized or ridiculed, when it has not been ignored completely.”⁶² This was underscored in 2009 with the release of a book entitled *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, the purpose of which can best be understood in the editors’ own words:

Stimulated by new editions of Shelley’s writings and the evidence of notebooks, the editors have assembled an outstanding group of international Shelley scholars to work through the implications of recent advances in scholarship. With particular attention to texts that have been neglected or underestimated, the contributors consider many important aspects of Shelley’s prolific and remarkably diverse output, including the verse letter, plays, prose essays, satire, pamphlets, political verse, romance, prefaces, translations from the Greek, prose style, artistic representations, fragments and early writings.⁶³

The book deals with poetry, the arts, prose, and plays. Several of the articles on poetry deal with early works - one from the notebooks, one from an 1813 edition of minor poems, and one on *Queen Mab*. Shelley’s two early novels are mentioned on page six of the introduction, written by the editors, Timothy Webb and Alan M. Weinberg, yet not by title, and no individual article is devoted to them, nor do any other contributors mention them.

Ultimately, the novels are deserving of a close look, not only for the insight they can provide into this particular time in Shelley’s life, but also purely out of curiosity. This thesis is based on the premise that Shelley’s intellect was keen at the time of their authorship; that while grateful for the approval of his classmates and others (*Zastrozzi* was “very successful”⁶⁴), this was not his primary motivation in writing them; that he was experimenting with the form of the Romance or Gothic novel, and that, as always, he has something to say.

⁶⁰ John V. Murphy, *The Dark Angel: Gothic Elements in Shelley’s Works* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975), 27 (hereafter cited as *Angel*).

⁶¹ F1977, xxii.

⁶² B2002, 8.

⁶³ Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb, eds., *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), front flap.

⁶⁴ Hartley, foreward to F1977, v.

II

Upon first perusing *Zastrozzi*, one is struck by the abrupt opening (Shelley begins *in medias res*), the short paragraphs, the melodramatic characters and the sensational action, which can be funny, morbid, absurd, and violent all at once. After a few chapters have elapsed, the characters become more complex and less predictable, drawing in the interest of the reader, yet it is clear that one needs to approach this novel with some detachment and an open mind. First of all, Shelley was a sensitive and complex young man and, like Lord Byron, he was very much a Regency man, accustomed to their “course attitudes and language”. Although he could be a difficult and cryptic poet who aspired to lofty heights, he was not afraid of down-to-earth, vulgar, and sometimes graphic physical references.⁶⁵ *Zastrozzi* abounds in these, and Shelley’s votaries may not be prepared for this type of writing from him. Thus, a suspension of expectations concerning form and content is required, along with a willingness to enter Shelley’s world on its own terms.

According to Leighton, for the Romantics, form is “a complicated idea. It ranges from objects seen, which are still and dead, to objects which act on the imagination and may even, therefore, be peculiarly energetic, vicious, disturbing.”⁶⁶ She finds that the concept of form was given dynamism by Schiller, who “fidgets with it, trying out grammatical alternatives: ‘form-drive’, ‘formal qualities’, ‘living form’, as if to push the noun into new shapes.”⁶⁷ Interestingly, this ‘living form’, according to Schiller, is the “object of the play-drive . . . what in the widest sense of the term we call beauty.”⁶⁸ For Schiller, beauty and horror are united in terms of formal expression, something Shelley demonstrates aptly in his poetic fragment, ‘On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, in the Florentine Gallery’. Frank feels that Shelley manifests this in both *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* as well, although, it must be admitted, perhaps not in the way that Schiller intended:

Aggressive in style, relentlessly sensational in content, and fragile in form, these books combine an expert knowledge of the elaborate technology of the Gothic romance and its mandatory apparatus with the future poet’s desire to arrive at a Gothic aesthetic through which beauty and horror could be expressed simultaneously.⁶⁹

Moreover, Schiller was adept at writing ghost stories and inspiring terror, as Coleridge well knew. When Coleridge and Robert Southey were good friends, he wrote Southey an impassioned letter one night in 1794:

’Tis past one o’clock in the morning – I sate down at twelve o’clock to read the ‘Robbers’ of Schiller – I had read chill and trembling until I came to the part where Moor fires a pistol over the Robbers who are asleep – I could read no more – My God! Southey! Who is this Schiller? This Convulser of the Heart? Did he write his

⁶⁵ Reiman, “Shelley Comes Of Age,” *Early Shelley*, 5-7.

⁶⁶ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁹ F1977, ix.

Tragedy amid the yelling of Fiends? – I should not like to [be] able to describe such Characters – I tremble like an Aspen Leaf – Upon my Soul, I write to you because I am frightened – I had better go to Bed.⁷⁰

This scene would be replayed on the shore of Lake Geneva by Lord Byron and his party during the summer of 1816 when they spent their evenings in the inclement weather together by the fire reading ghost stories and discussing Erasmus Darwin's theories of regeneration, one result of which was *Frankenstein*. *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* were written several years before this, and thus horror, beauty, and manifestations of the sublime were being explored in various formats by numerous Romantic writers. As Leighton notes, for the Romantics, the "relationship between form and substance is not a given, but dramatic, risky, essentially a disjunction."⁷¹ Here she is speaking more specifically about poetic forms, and is exploring the various ways that form can manifest as art, yet the discussion of phantoms, ghosts and "vicious, disturbing" imagery is quite appropriate to *Zastrozzi*. Today, poetry is segregated from other literary forms, but in the nineteenth century it was integrated, regularly appearing in newspapers and other print media. In fact, P. B. Shelley, Rosa Matilda, 'Monk' Lewis, and Ann Radcliffe all incorporated poetry into their novels, and Mary Shelley, while not including poems of her own, quoted several poets, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dante, Lord Byron and Shelley.⁷² Moreover, the Romance novels of the day, with their aspects of horror and terror, infiltrated the poetry of Coleridge and Shelley, among others, making an exploration of *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* pertinent.

Clery notes that authors used this type of Romance as a vehicle to ponder current issues and events by engaging "in complex ways with contemporary social realities", and this can provide a barometer for entryway into *Zastrozzi*.⁷³ Upon first glance, as Duff observes, the novel appears to be far from complex:

only the most determined exegete would wish, for example, to 'interpret' the sufferings of Verezzi in Shelley's gothic novel *Zastrozzi* (Verezzi suffers simply because Matilda causes him to suffer).⁷⁴

However, Watt points out that in *The Monk*, "Lewis was primarily concerned to define his work *against* current romance paradigms."⁷⁵ This astute observation can effectively be applied to Shelley's novels as well, for he was, according to Behrendt, "deliberately advocating unconventional, generally liberal causes" underneath the required façade of this type of novel.⁷⁶ All of these comments are in line with what Maggie Kilgour has identified as a shift in Gothic critical approaches. Early scholars had to work hard to gain credibility for the genre:

⁷⁰ Michael Gamer, "Gothic fictions and Romantic writing in Britain," *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 88.

⁷¹ Leighton, *On Form*, 8.

⁷² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 11, 35, 36, 47, 64.

⁷³ Clery, *Rise of Supernatural Fiction*, 173.

⁷⁴ David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 175.

⁷⁵ Watt, *Contesting the Gothic*, 100-101.

⁷⁶ B1986, ix.

The monumental Montague Summers, however, both defiantly and authoritatively insisted that readers take the gothic seriously as an art form. With Walpolean flamboyance he inverted traditional aesthetic hierarchies, claiming that, far from being a low form of popular art, the gothic was 'an aristocrat of literature', and warned his readers that 'all men of taste, all cognoscenti, all who can have the slightest claim to literary knowledge or are fond of books have read at least *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Italian*, *The Monk*, and *Melmoth the Wanderer*'.⁷⁷

For Summers the Gothic represented an escape from reality, a dream world without which life would be terribly dull. He did not see the Gothic as dangerous, and was quick to separate it from the violence of the French Revolution. Moreover, he did not like the emergence of surrealism, which confused life with art and was a concept he did not entertain. Yet, according to Kilgour, it was surrealism which breathed new life into the Gothic in the form psychoanalysis, which helps to shed light on the dream world of the unconscious mind in a scientific manner, and has resulted in a dramatic increase in the amount of Gothic criticism being undertaken:

Nearing the end of this [the 20th] century, the gothic has undergone a gradual revolution in prestige, in which also the grounds of evaluation and assessment of its achievement have reversed. While a late aesthete like Summers admired the form for its autonomy and independence from, even aristocratic indifference towards, reality, critics today locate its significance in its revelation of social conditions. . . . The gothic has seemed relevant to attempts to theorise the relation between art, politics, history and sexuality.⁷⁸

Or, as Day succinctly phrases it, "The study of the Gothic illuminates the unbroken connections between our imaginative life and our economic, social, and political life."⁷⁹

In the preface to *Close Reading*, the editors stress that their "anthology is intended to represent and undercut" approaches "between so-called formalist and so-called nonformalist (especially 'political') modes of reading". They find that the two major opposing critical schools of the twentieth century, formalism and historicism, share "a commitment to close attention to literary texture and what is embodied there". Though recognizing differences, they "emphasize the continuity . . . We like to imagine an ideal literary critic as one who commands and seamlessly integrates both styles of reading."⁸⁰ This sensitivity to the text, as well as to issues of the day which were of a concern to Shelley, will be beneficial in navigating these novels, though it is necessary to be able to read between the lines. Shelley was already quite clever at "audience-manipulation,"⁸¹ and yet at times he was being solely tongue-in-cheek, as critics such as Cameron and Holmes have observed.

⁷⁷ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 218.

⁷⁸ Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 221.

⁷⁹ William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 191, quoted in Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 259n78.

⁸⁰ Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois, eds., preface to *Close Reading: The Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), ix.

⁸¹ B1986, ix.

Alan Rawes states in his introduction to *Romanticism and Form* that deconstruction has engendered the contemplation of “formal indirection, instability, fragmentation, irregularity, illegitimacy, gratuity, multiplicity, doubleness, combination, foldedness, indeterminacy, artifice, openness to contingency and playfulness.”⁸² Many of these adjectives can be applied to Shelley’s early novels, not only in terms of what is within them, but also of the way in which they are perceived. They manifest irregularity when compared to his later works, playfulness and doubleness (in *Zastrozzi*), and fragmentation and indeterminacy (particularly in terms of the ending of *St. Irvyne*, which, like Dacre before him, “similarly eschewed the plenitude of romance closure”⁸³). Their illegitimacy is very strong, as has been discussed. The novels have been bypassed by a variety of critical approaches and methods down through the years, including the New Criticism, formalism, and historicism, but perhaps a deconstructionist approach to reading and form can offer a promising new outlook for Shelley’s early fiction. However, that is not my approach because of the potent stigma attached to the novels. For example, when Elizabeth Barrett read *St. Irvyne*, she could not believe that Shelley had written it until Robert Browning convinced her he had done so.⁸⁴ F. R. Leavis explains that the majority of critics nearly unanimously agree that “Shelley’s genius was ‘essentially lyrical’.”⁸⁵ This attitude is still prevalent and it is necessary to break through that barrier first.

Although primarily studying compositions by Shelley alone, my research is nevertheless in some sense interdisciplinary, in that it crosses genres. The main reason is that the novels are of the Gothic tradition, while the poetry is some of the finest ever read by me in any language. To say it is some of the finest ever written could cause eyebrows to be raised, as it would have for Leavis, who notes that, “in finding Shelley almost unreadable one need not be committing oneself to a fashionably limited taste.”⁸⁶ Sir Leslie Stephen would agree. He “encouraged serious literary discussion and loved to read aloud, or rather in the case of poetry, recite aloud to his daughters, a habit he continued to the end of his life. . . . As is clear from his essays, however, Shelley was not among his favorites.”⁸⁷ At least one of his daughters disagreed, for other than Shakespeare, no “poet seems to have exerted a greater effect on Virginia Woolf’s imagination than Shelley.”⁸⁸ Personal taste aside, some flexibility in comparison between the novels and the poetry is required. For example, as a student of the poetry, the novels were not mentioned to me at all, and remained a hidden secret, one which I discovered on my own after my curiosity was piqued by *Frankenstein*. Only after that did I learn the extent of the revulsion they are met with in academic circles. These novels raise “uncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality.”⁸⁹ Shelley was a radical nonconformist, a complex poet and a highly sophisticated thinker, who supposedly outgrew his fascination with the Gothic and moved on to more staid and sober pursuits under William Godwin’s influence. Hughes feels that “after *St. Irvyne*, nothing of any bulk or

⁸² Alan Rawes, ed., introduction to *Romanticism and Form* (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan, 2007), xiii.

⁸³ Watt, *Contesting the Gothic*, 101.

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 30.

⁸⁵ F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition & Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), 206-207.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸⁷ Nathaniel Brown, “The ‘Double Soul’: Virginia Woolf, Shelley, and Androgyny,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* XXXIII (1984): 183.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸⁹ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5.

consequence came from his pen of the old 'distempered kind'," and the few poems that did, such as in *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*, Hughes labels as "backslidings."⁹⁰ Thus, taking the novels seriously provokes a sense of disapprobation and inquietude among Shelley scholars, because it threatens the identity which Shelley himself helped to craft.

While scholars of the Gothic are quick to point out the Gothic influence in Romantic poetry, they are also rather quick to gloss over Shelley's early novels, or to ignore them completely. Perhaps this is because the Gothic, though loved, has suffered from an inferiority complex concerning the issue of status. As Anna Letitia Barbauld pointed out in 1810:

books of this description are condemned by the grave, and despised by the fastidious; but their leaves are seldom found unopened, and they occupy the parlour and the dressing-room while productions of higher name are often gathering dust upon the shelf. It might not perhaps be difficult to show that this species of composition is entitled to a higher rank than has been generally assigned it.⁹¹

Shelley's poems, such as *Alastor*, 'The Witch of Atlas', 'Ode to the West Wind', and *The Revolt of Islam* can be used to bolster and defend the Gothic to a greater effect, as Varma does, than the little-known and even less appreciated novels would be able to.⁹² Therefore, in spite of Gothicism's rise in popularity, the novels have slipped through the cracks in both fields of scholarship, and would have completely disappeared had they not been tied to Shelley's name. This tie has proven to be adamant, and fortunately has rescued them from oblivion. Angela Wright notes that the "artificial separation of Gothic from poetry began towards the end of the eighteenth century, particularly with the attack by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) on *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Lewis (1775-1818)."⁹³ Yet recent scholars have questioned this division. Miles points out that "it is a literary historical solecism to equate the Gothic only with fiction. During its initial phase (1750-1820) Gothic writing also encompassed drama and poetry, and before it was any of these Gothic was a taste, an 'aesthetic'."⁹⁴ Gamer refines this and views the Gothic as a "shifting aesthetic" rather than a literary genre, because of its tremendous flexibility and diversity, its power to cross "forms and media: from narrative into dramatic and poetic modes, and from textual into visual and aural media."⁹⁵

Therefore, along with poetic exegesis, the Gothic will be studied; however, unlike Nicola Trott's valuable discussion of the Gothic in Wordsworth, this will not be a general exploration of the Gothic in Shelley's poetry.⁹⁶ That would be a valid study, and could offer rich insight, but it is too vast. Two main questions will be asked as the starting point. First, do *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* have any relevance to the

⁹⁰ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 38, 38n5.

⁹¹ Anna Letitia Barbauld, *On the Origin and Progress of Novel Writing* (British Novelists, Vol. I, 1810) quoted in Devendra P. Varma, *Gothic Flame* (London: Arthur Barker, 1957), 1.

⁹² Varma, *Gothic Flame*, 197-199.

⁹³ Angela Wright, *Gothic Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2007), 3.

⁹⁴ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, 2nd ed., 1.

⁹⁵ Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 4.

⁹⁶ Nicola Trott, "Wordsworth's Gothic Quandary," *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* 110 (April 2000), 45-59.

later poetry? And if so, how and what? John V. Murphy's indispensable exposé on the Gothic in Shelley will be used as a springboard to additional exploration. At times it is difficult to separate the novels and their influence on Shelley's later poetic works from the diffusive nature of the Gothic itself, yet specific similarities are apparent, for as Behrendt has noted, "Tilottama Rajan, Peter Finch, and others have underscored . . . the close relation of the early romances to Shelley's later work."⁹⁷

A useful approach for bridging the gap between the novels and the later poetic works is found in Shelley's poem, 'To a Sky-Lark', because in this poem Shelley alludes to what it means to be a poet. He describes the human condition as filled with sorrow, and states:

Yet if we could scorn
Hate and pride and fear;
If we were things born
Not to shed a tear,
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near. (ll 91-95)⁹⁸

Even in an ideal utopian human condition, the realm of the skylark would remain out of reach. Nevertheless, the skylark holds the key to what Shelley seeks as a poet, and he indicates this by saying the skylark's skill is "Better than all measures / Of delightful sound, / Better than all treasures / That in books are found" (ll 96-99). For scholars of Shelley who are aware of how erudite he was and how much he loved books and was always reading, this is saying something. The qualities of the skylark mentioned throughout the poem are various, but they come down to expressing an unpremeditated joy with a full heart, a joy which is not tied to the ground or to daily existence. It is lofty and springs forth from the earth to the heavens above like an arrow, able to aim for and hit its target. Elsewhere in letters and prose Shelley also describes the qualities and duties of a poet, and one of the most important is to be able to share what is felt in the poet's own heart with others, and to touch them, as it were, heart to heart. It seems to be more important for the poet to touch the heart of another than the mind, even though Shelley's verse is not always easily understood and is considered highly intellectual. Another way to express this from a twentieth century perspective is "So vast, so limitless in capacity is man's imagination to disperse and burn away the rubble-dross of fact and probability, leaving only truth and dream."⁹⁹

These qualities, which the skylark possesses, can be found in the novels of the young Percy Bysshe Shelley, who writes with lofty ideals and a sincere motive. *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* are deemed not to be many things, not of high quality, not worth reading, uninteresting, but it can be said they were the youthful product of unpremeditated joy at life, and are expressive of a desire to reach out to others without self-censure. In this sense, they are particularly valuable because Shelley quickly learned to temper his output and to offer to the world only the most polished verse or well-crafted prose. Shelley has been described as "the poet of adolescence" who inspires "a passionate love . . . not only for

⁹⁷ B2002, 12.

⁹⁸ *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Jack Donovan, et al., vol. 3, 1819-1820 (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2011), 468-478 (hereafter cited as Longman3).

⁹⁹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1950), 261.

particular poems, but for an idea of Shelley and the Shelley style.”¹⁰⁰ But young people seem to outgrow this love as they mature, leaving Shelley and his idealism in the dust:

The immediately relevant question is: Why should it be thought any disparagement at all to say that Shelley is adolescent and the bulk of his work immature? For it is surely just this that gives it its unquestioned power, its unique character in our literature. . . . The vagueness, profusion, and complexity of the images are among the greatest attractions; it is indeed poetry ‘not perfectly understood’; but it is poetry loved with greater intensity and passion than any poetry afterward. The strongest evidence of Shelley’s essential immaturity is his unfailing popularity with the young. . . . Not only can past experience be recalled by Shelley with peculiar vividness; but there is an immature element in most adult situations, and Shelley is the supreme poet of exactly that.¹⁰¹

In many ways the novels are timeless, untethered to any particular moment in time by descriptions of clothing, manners, and trappings of the era, though the characters move on horseback or in a carriage. This lack of conformity provides an early example of a stream of consciousness novel, making them a forerunner of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Scholars of Shelley’s poetry have commented on its hectic quality, particularly when compared with a poet such as Keats, who slowly relishes his metaphors.¹⁰² Generally speaking, it is accurate to note that images of speed are not the same thing as ‘speed’ of the poetry, but this distinction gets muddled with Shelley:

To many readers nothing has seemed more characteristic of Shelley’s writing than its speed. Here is C. S. Lewis, elaborating his ‘proposition that Shelley and Milton are, each, the half of Dante’: ‘You know . . . the air and fire of Shelley, the very antithesis of the Miltonic solidity, the untrammelled, reckless speed through pellucid spaces which makes us imagine while we are reading him that we have somehow left our bodies behind.’ Leavis knew this sensation but disliked and mistrusted it; for him, the essential antithesis was between Wordsworth’s patient steady contemplation and ‘Shelley’s eager, breathless hurry—his verse always seems to lean forward, so that it must run in order not to fall.’¹⁰³

This is confirmed with an example from *Prometheus Unbound* when the First Spirit says, “On a battle-trumpet’s blast / I fled hither, fast, fast, fast,” (Act I, II 694-5).¹⁰⁴ This line has the reader literally leaning forward. Keach investigates the stylistic sources of speed in Shelley’s poetry and attempts to disentangle them from the mental states of the poet, a difficult task. Although Shelley crafted his verse with care, particularly in the revision process, he often wrote in a flash of inspiration.

¹⁰⁰ Humphrey House, “The Poet of Adolescence,” *Shelley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. George M. Ridenour (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 47.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁰² See Wilson Knight’s essays on Keats and Shelley in *The Starlit Dome*, 179-307 (London: OUP, 1941), & Chapter V, “Shelley’s Speed”, in William Keach, *Shelley’s Style*, 154-183 (New York: Methuen, 1984).

¹⁰³ Keach, *Style*, 154.

¹⁰⁴ *CPW*, 204-274.

Images of speed abound in *Alastor; or The Spirit of Solitude*, considered to be Shelley's first mature poem, written not that long before *Laon and Cythna*, and a poem which Murphy and others such as Varma identify as an extremely Gothic one. In *Alastor*, the little boat flees on "With unrelaxing speed" (l 366), "with dizzy swiftness" (l 388), and when the narrator walks, it is "With rapid steps" (l 522).¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the concept of speed forms another useful point of intersection between the novels and the poems, because this quality is present in the novels too. What is particularly contradictory, however, is that to read Shelley well, one must slow down:

I am led to believe that there is but a very limited number of people in the world who care for Shelley's Poetry, by the fact that I never met with a single person outside the circle of professed students of it, who could lay claim to having read more than two or three of his most celebrated lyrics.

This is not so surprising when we consider that there is little enjoyment to be derived from his works by those who read as they run; but that they afford an ever-increasing and permanent treasure of delight to those who will be at the pains to study them, may, I am quite sure, be safely affirmed.¹⁰⁶

Part of Shelley's persona of youthful enthusiasm, idealism and renewal is connected to the concept of swiftness and a willingness to embrace change—to create a better day now, rather than waiting until tomorrow. Although *il buon tempo verra*, an epigram engraved on a ring Shelley wore, is expressed in the future tense,¹⁰⁷ that day is coming because of action taken in the present. This sense of urgency is expressed nowhere as tenaciously as it is in the novels, and nowhere as freely.

¹⁰⁵ *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest, vol. 1, 1804-1817 (Burnt Mill: Longman, 1989), 458-489 (hereafter cited as Longman1).

¹⁰⁶ F. S. Ellis, "Some words by way of apology", *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. (1892; repr., Tokyo: Senjo Publishing, 1963), 1:vii-viii.

¹⁰⁷ The meaning is "A Better Day is Coming" (my translation).

III

Sedgwick, Railo and Summers all identify specific properties which are common in Gothic novels:

priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; garrulous retainers; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; nocturnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past; Faust- and Wandering Jew-like figures; civil insurrections and fires; the charnel house and the madhouse.¹⁰⁸

Shelley does not use all of these in *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, but he uses those which he tends to favor, such as sleeplike and deathlike states, doubles, the discovery of obscured family ties, possibilities of incest, nocturnal landscapes and dreams, and Faust- and Wandering Jew-like figures. Civil insurrections and fires occur in *Laon and Cythna*, unnatural echoes, silences and the unspeakable in *The Cenci*. Because of these required elements, Elizabeth Napier has argued that the Gothic was a failure as a genre, forcing its authors to make “use of the same devices: ruined castles, secret panels, concealed portraits, underground passageways . . . [with] little variation on this design.”¹⁰⁹ She continues:

At attempt to isolate the distinctive qualities of Gothic narrative brings the reader repeatedly back to this characteristic: Gothicism is finally much less about evil, ‘the fascination of the abomination’, than it is a standardized, absolutely formulaic system of creating a certain kind of atmosphere in which a reader’s sensibility toward fear and horror is exercised in predictable ways. . . . This is not a popular stand to take towards the Gothic because much of the more spirited recent criticism of the genre has been explicitly directed towards denying that it is a ‘collection of ghost-story devices’. . . . The devices . . . become necessarily signifier of some deeper meaning.¹¹⁰

Shelley’s novels would seem to be an exception to her criticism, perhaps because in dealing with evil, while dressing it up in a dramatic way to some extent, more often than not he clothed it in the customs of the day, including courtship, marriage, and human relations culminating in passionate acts of vengeance or hatred. Supernatural phenomena do not play a role. It seems from the start that the novels were not written to inspire terror or horror, as much as to question issues of authority. Justice is a central theme, with a trial occurring in *Zastrozzi*, and issues of divine justice inwoven into *St. Irvyne*. Existential questions such as ‘Why do I live? Why do I suffer? Who made me?’ are posed with an inescapable intensity.

In many ways the novels are funny rather than scary, parodying that essential element of the Gothic. This is a highly skilled technique, which Shelley possessed from a young age, and is a far cry from

¹⁰⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 9-10, 35n1.

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth R. Napier, *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-Century Literary Form* (Oxford: CP, 1987), 28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29, 29nn44-46.

the poor craftsmanship attributed to these novels. This is evident in a mischievous letter written by Shelley and his sister, Elizabeth:

My dear Graham—

At half after twelve do you be walking up & down the avenue of trees near Clapham Church, & when you see a Post Chaise stop at Mrs. Fennings door, do you advance towards it, & without observing who are inside of it speak to them—An eventful & terrific mystery hangs over it—you are to change your name from Edward Fergus Graham, to William Grove—prepare therefore for something extraordinary. There is more in a cucumber than you are aware of—in two cucumbers indeed, they are now almost 2s. 6d a piece—reflect well upon that—!!!—All this is to be done on Wednesday—neither Eliz[abe]th or myself cares what else you have to do.—

If Satan had never fallen
Hell had been made for thee!¹¹¹

Send two Zastrozzi's to Sir J. Dashwood in Harly Street, directed to F. Dashwood Esqr—send one to Ransom Morland's & co-directed to Mr. Chenevix—

I remain

Yours devotedly
P B Shelley—¹¹²

Not only is the letter playful in tone, but serious too with the price of cucumbers mentioned, it continues on with several postscripts written by them but signed by the opposite sibling. What is noteworthy is that *Zastrozzi* was hot off the press at the time, and Shelley seems proud of it, not ashamed of it. *St. Irvyne* was not published until approximately eight months after this letter was written, though it may have been in progress, or perhaps was already completed. What is apparent from this letter is that the Gothic was for Shelley a social activity, involving his sisters and his friends. Even his mother makes a grisly appearance, which would have been a compliment coming from Shelley, and indicates the friendly way he included her in this game. This occurs in the first of several postscripts (this one was written by Shelley but signed by him in Elizabeth's name). Graham is warned about Shelley's mother, who appears in true Gothic form, "keep yourself concealed as my mother brings a blood stained stiletto whic{h} she purposes to make you bathe in the life blood of her enemy."¹¹³

Murphy finds that this letter supports to some degree Cameron's claim that the novels were written purely for fun and sport, though he stresses the important themes that appear in the juvenilia which recur in the mature works.¹¹⁴ Penzoldt explains that "the pure tale of horror can never reach a high literary standard, because it uses the most primitive devices to create terror, and often merely

¹¹¹ Jones notes that this quote is taken from the heading to Chapter IX, *St. Irvyne*, in *Letters*, 1:9n10. Behrendt explains that the lines are from Edward Young's tragedy, *The Revenge* (1721), in B1986, 205.

¹¹² Shelley and Elizabeth Shelley to Edward Fergus Graham, Field Place, Monday 23 April 1810, 1:10.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ *Angel*, 26-27.

disgusts where it should frighten.”¹¹⁵ This criticism is not relevant to Shelley’s novels, because horror is not his aim, unless it could be instilling horror at the status quo. Murphy senses this as well, and is quick to defend him by saying, “When terror, horror, and, more significantly, the mind in a state of turbulence mingle with ideas of free love, defiance of man’s and God’s laws, terrible destructive tendencies, and the ambiguous line between good and evil, then Shelley’s novels can be viewed seriously as indicators of his later concerns.”¹¹⁶

When one reads scholars such as A. M. D. Hughes and his summary of the novels, it is easy to wonder about my approach. Basically Hughes finds that the events and characters of Shelley’s novels can be traced to Rosa Matilda, Matthew Lewis, Mrs. Radcliffe, and William Godwin’s *St. Leon*. The lack of so-called originality, coupled with Shelley’s subsequent disavowal of them, has led Hughes and others to repudiate them too, as did Mary Shelley in her notes. Nevertheless, Hughes offers some specific insights which are helpful, even when being critical, for in spite of himself he hits upon reasons why the novels are estimable. First of all, Hughes admired “Dr A. H. Koszul’s brilliant book, *La Jeunesse de Shelley* (Paris, 1910)” because Koszul “shows how much they [the novels] foreshadow of the poet’s later self—his bias for the extremes of energy, sensibility, and passion, his heresy and mysticism.”¹¹⁷ Hughes concurs:

The Alpine landscapes owed their features to the Gothic tradition, but his own mind was at work in the choice of those vivid marks of the mystery of life and death, familiar afterwards in his poetry— . . . Shelley’s Alps, lurid as a coloured poster, are yet the first essays of a special sense for grandeur and energy, just as Zastrozzi and Ginotti are the infant brethren of Cenci.¹¹⁸

Hughes notes that Shelley “overtopped” Lewis in one passage, that he borrowed from Mrs. Byrne (Rosa Matilda or Charlotte Dacre) but matched her, and that Mrs. Radcliffe’s Schedoni “suffers not so exquisitely as Wolfstein contemplating the lovely Olympia.”¹¹⁹

In the description of the castles, the streets of Venice, the courts of the Inquisition, he is weak and scanty; but, though his mountains and forests in storm or moonlight cannot vie with Mrs. Radcliffe’s, a touch of detail here or there promises the especial vision of his nature poetry – the moon that ‘like the spirit of the spotless ether, which shrinks from the obtrusive gaze of man, hung behind a leaden-coloured cloud’, or the arid grasses in castle walls or the lone scathed pine in the glacier’s track, symbols of a quenchless life and will. It is especially in the emotional passages, however, that he elaborates his models; scantier than they in the action and description, in the passion he is more profuse and far more hectic.¹²⁰

While Koszul finds Shelley to be careless “of mere narrative”, he highlights the way that Shelley pays “attention to dramatic incidents or to situations of horror or psychical stress.”¹²¹ This is a keen

¹¹⁵ Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (London: P. Nevill, 1952), 93, quoted in *Angel*, 38

¹¹⁶ *Angel*, 38.

¹¹⁷ A. M. D. Hughes, “Shelley’s *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne*,” *The Modern Language Review* VII:1 (January 1912), 54.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹¹⁹ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 35.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

¹²¹ Hughes, “*Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne*,” 61.

observation. Hughes compliments Shelley because he “elaborates beyond his models the terrors of Verezzi’s underground prison . . . ; the agony of a dangerous illness . . . ; and especially the erotic tension and tumult between Verezzi and Matilda, in which, remarkably enough, there is more energy and detail than in Lewis or Mrs Byrne.”¹²² There is also the issue of characterization:

But, above all, the titanic malefactors attracted him. . . .

All this matter Shelley has handled with a touch of his own; . . . [T]here are hints of his later faith in a citadel of the soul that cannot be taken by any evil power. But his imagination drew by instinct to the desolate grandeur intended in the Gothic giants, and they and bits of their histories lay in his memory till he should touch them to far finer issues in the after years.¹²³

Therefore, the critical points for both Koszul and Hughes are Shelley’s vigor and passion, his awareness of psychic tautness and his capacity to develop it, his pondering of mystical and metaphysical questions in a way which is accessible, his villains, the human suffering he explores, and his sparse but magical descriptions of nature. Although there is a great deal to regard highly in this list, the balance sheet is a negative one for Hughes, for he finds that “the only charm in the two novels is the author’s sincere enjoyment of them,”¹²⁴ which may be worth far more than he realized.

This movement particularly attracted young people and female readers, not to mention female writers.¹²⁵ This was in part because of the “feminisation of reading practices and markets,”¹²⁶ stimulating a fear that women would be corrupted by such reading, for they “might try and mimic some of the lewd scenes or escapes that they read about.”¹²⁷ “Considered as a serious threat to literary and social values,”¹²⁸ Gothic novels were associated with the French Revolution, for it was during that decade that they were the most popular.¹²⁹ Moreover, due to the appearance of Lewis’ *The Monk*, criticism increased, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the vanguard, because *The Monk* acted as a lightning rod, sparking a major reaction. Lewis was a young member of parliament and this added to the shock.¹³⁰ As a result, numerous satires appeared in the 1790s, which, while “appearing to be light-hearted, . . . none the less passed serious comment upon the consequent evils of over-consumption of Gothic romance by young women.”¹³¹ Yet Shelley was immersed in the Gothic, and the novels gave him an opportunity to reach out to his peers in a platform that was readily available and accessible to them, using language and story lines with which they were familiar. This is unlike his later poetry which was often in Spenserian stanzas (and often not) and was directed toward the elite, and cannot be considered light or casual reading. It could be said that Shelley wanted to encourage young women to develop their

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 36.

¹²⁴ Hughes, “Zastrozzi and St Irvyne,” 61.

¹²⁵ Botting, *Gothic*, 47.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹²⁷ Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 19-20.

¹²⁸ Botting, *Gothic*, 9.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁰ Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 15-20.

¹³¹ Ibid., 20.

capacities to think for themselves, and to break the chains that bound them, as Blake so aptly expresses in his poem, 'London'.¹³²



The William Blake Archive, Songs of Innocence and Experience, Copy A, 1795, British Museum, <http://www.blakearchive.org>

¹³² William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, 3rd ed., ed. W. H. Stevenson (Edinburgh Gate, UK: Longman, 2007), 220.

IV

Peck and Hughes have summarized the plots of the novels,¹³³ but they will not be recounted here. Instead, aspects of the novels which are relevant will be explained, and more will be flushed out in the discussion of each poem. According to Hughes, Shelley “has taken the cards from the hands of Mrs. Byrne, and has dealt them out again.”¹³⁴ That is to say, all of the events of the stories for both *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, with a few exceptions which are from other novels, come from *Zofloya, or The Moor*. *Zastrozzi* has a clear plot line which can be followed, but *St. Irvyne* is not as easy to understand. Murphy describes it as follows: “Regrettably, his second novel, *St. Irvyne* (1811), is not nearly so easy to summarize as *Zastrozzi*. Distinct problems arise from two irreconcilable plots, loose development of themes, and vague relationships between central characters.”¹³⁵ Murphy explains that chapters five and six are missing from *St. Irvyne*, which impacted the plot development, while Punter says that chapter seven is missing from *Zastrozzi*, and he analyses that in terms of “a crypt, . . . something excluded, something excised.”¹³⁶

It is an understatement to remark that the novels have not fared well among the literati. Although Duffy mentions them in relation to his argument on the revolutionary sublime without providing a caveat for having done so, this is rare.¹³⁷ Yet occasionally another posture is adopted, two of which will now be introduced to help propel the analysis forward. In the process, a renewed perspective of the wider issues in play in later twentieth century Gothic criticism will be presented to help integrate the novels into this framework. *Zastrozzi* has been read “as a narrative of the split personality” by Chesser, a medical psychologist, who applies this to Shelley’s psyche, and by Punter, who builds upon Chesser’s reading by considering it in terms of the “characterology of the text”:

We have a split masculine force, split between the protagonist figure of Verezzi and the classic Gothic villain Zastrozzi; and we have a split feminine force, split between the desired but already lost object, Julia, who is separated from Verezzi for the entire length of the book, and the figure of commanding and destructive desire, Matilda, who partly unwittingly brings about Verezzi’s death. In Jungian terms we might say that here we are talking about ‘partial systems’, parts of the personality split off and projected as independent beings. Zastrozzi has many aspects of the Jungian Shadow: a comparison with Blake’s Spectres would be illuminating here, as would a more general comparison with the Zoas. As Chesser says, it is as though we are watching a single actor playing four parts, albeit some of the changes of costume are somewhat breathless and incompetent.¹³⁸

¹³³ Walter Edwin Peck, *Shelley: His Life and Work*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 1:90-100, 2:305-318; Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 31-35; Hughes, “Zastrozzi and St Irvyne,” 54-63.

¹³⁴ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 32.

¹³⁵ *Angel*, 29.

¹³⁶ *Angel*, 29n7; Punter, *Pathologies*, 74. In B1986, Chapter VII is missing as well, but Behrendt explains that in the original, Chapter IX was the missing one.

¹³⁷ Duffy, *Sublime*, 20-21.

¹³⁸ Punter, *Pathologies*, 64.

This type of partitioning has been identified by Letellier as a construct common in Gothic novels called The Quadruple Alignment of Character. Generally speaking, there is a male who is a “great villain-hero”, a female who is “his principal accomplice in crime”; the unfolding plot involves a “love-death relationship” on the part of the villain-hero with an angelic woman who happens to be in love with a flawed young man. Letellier finds that Shelley succeeds in adopting this motif very well in both novels, but contrary to others who place Rosa Matilda and her *Zofloya* in a position of prominence, he finds that Matthew Lewis is the star:

More than ever it is the influence of *The Monk* which is in evidence in the disposition of characters. Zastrozzi is of the larger-than-life conception of Ambrosio; Matilda di Laurentini corresponds almost identically with the demonic Matilda of the same novel: her name itself is taken over from Lewis and compounded with another from Ann Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*. The young couple Verezzi and Julia are surely modeled along the lines of Raymond and Agnes, although Julia is really more like the angelic Antonia.¹³⁹

Punter introduces Freud as well, and it is perhaps not surprising that the unconscious mind has reared its head in his essay, for whether scholars identify the Gothic as separate from reality or a part of it, “Gothic writing is regarded as mysteriously eloquent: in its inarticulate way, Gothic worries over a problem stirring within the foundations of the self.”¹⁴⁰ Experts such as Varma and Tompkins have long asserted that this mysteriousness is one of its fascinations, and that it embodies a creativity which pulls the reader in and encourages the reader’s participation.¹⁴¹ This bringing in of the unconscious mind, of the awakening of a deeper spiritual consciousness in the material culture of Regency England, and of making the reader a co-creator is something that probably interested the young Shelley. But it is oxymoronic, because his later works are considered esoteric and seeking the betterment of humankind, while the novels, with their violence and wildness, are rejected out-of-hand. Yet it is this very quality that Chesser found attractive:

When I first came across *Zastrozzi* I was immediately struck by its resemblance to the dream material with which every psychoanalyst is familiar. It was not a story told with the detachment of a professional writer for the entertainment of the public. Whatever the conscious intention of the young Shelley, he was in fact writing for himself. He was opening the floodgates of the unconscious and allowing its fantasies to pour out unrestrainedly. . . .

Superficially, *Zastrozzi* belonged to a popular contemporary *genre*. Indeed, it imitated to the point of plagiarism other Gothic romances. But it differed fundamentally from the potboilers of the period. All it owed to such authors as Mrs Radcliffe and Mrs Byrne were the stock characters and backcloth. In essence it came straight out of the unconscious as surely as Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Robert Ignatius Letellier, “Shelley and the Gothic Tradition” in *Shelley 1792-1992* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 90-91.

¹⁴⁰ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, 2nd ed., 1.

¹⁴¹ J. M. S. Tompkins, introduction to *Gothic Flame*, xii.

¹⁴² Eustace Chesser, *Shelley and Zastrozzi: Self-Revelation of a Neurotic* (London: Gregg, 1965), 7-8.

IV

Of particular interest is the way Verezzi, the hero, is characterized. Chesser sees him as Narcissus, "it is as though a glass screen separates him from all other human beings, making it impossible for them to break through the shell of his ego."¹⁴³ This would seem to accord with Sedgwick's assertion that the Gothic is really about "inner warfare, inner spaces, inner dimensions," while Punter sees him as "empty space" because throughout the novel he manifests "an extreme and extraordinary passivity."¹⁴⁴ This concept of passivity and the Gothic is nothing new. Because the Gothic rejects all authority in a dark and cruel world, "a world where initiative is too often a monopoly of the bad", it has been interpreted to be an encouragement of the passive. Tobin Siebers feels Romanticism as a whole can be seen as irresponsibly encouraging this type of passive behavior and actually celebrating the victim in social relations.¹⁴⁵ In addition, Punter notes that Verezzi "has effectively lost his wits before the beginning of the story" and he provides several examples to support this, one of which is Verezzi's "frequent lapses into insensibility."¹⁴⁶ This is a very interesting point, considering Richardson's novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, and Rousseau's *Julie*. Verezzi suffers from a "deep", "extraordinary", and "unnatural sleep" (pp 5-6) as well, the cause of which is unknown. Verezzi was kidnapped in the opening moments of the story for reasons which are also unknown. He didn't awaken during any of the traumatic events which befell him, including being picked up from his bed, carried outside to the carriage, and then traveling in the carriage all night long, the entire next day, and into the following night. At last he does awaken, when he is being taken into a cavern where he is kept prisoner:

Verezzi followed as fast as his frame, weakened by unnatural sleep and enfeebled by recent illness, would permit; yet, scarcely believing that he was awake, and not thoroughly convinced of the reality of the scene before him, he viewed every thing with that kind of inexplicable horror, which a terrible dream is wont to excite (p 6).

In this description, Shelley is mixing the conscious state with a dream, and Verezzi is not sure whether he wakes or sleeps. Kilgour notes that the "truth rises not when we are in control, but when we lose it", which Verezzi dramatically experiences in these opening moments of the novel. She explains that "Freud's concept of the 'uncanny', through which something once familiar becomes estranged from us, is often invoked to explain the gothic's defamiliarisation of reality."¹⁴⁷

Moreover, this sleep has prevented Verezzi from reacting to being kidnapped any time sooner, and has deadened that experience to some extent. There is no drama in it, and it cannot be that traumatic, because, like a babe cradled in its mother's arms, Verezzi sleeps right through it. This is a powerful strategy for de-horrifying the action of the novel, and it also indicates that humankind is sleeping or unaware of the injustices which exist in the current state of society. For example, the

¹⁴³ Chesser, *Shelley and Zastrozzi*, 24-25.

¹⁴⁴ Sedgwick, *Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, 140; Punter, *Pathologies*, 66.

¹⁴⁵ J. M. S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England 1770-1800* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 135-136, quoted in Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 259n81.

¹⁴⁶ Punter, *Pathologies*, 66.

¹⁴⁷ Kilgour, *Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 220.

excessive sleep could be symbolic of the victims of slavery (or other types of persecution, including the victims of the guillotine, many of whom were workers, clergy members and women) being unable to defend themselves, and therefore being in a catatonic-like state similar to that of sleep, as a refrain in Robert Southey's anti-slavery poem, 'To the Genius of Africa' (1795) expresses: "Avenging Power awake – arise!"¹⁴⁸ In addition, Shelley distorts time and the biological functions which occur within time. Verezzi sleeps for more than 48 hours, perhaps close to 60 hours, without taking care of any bodily needs, such as consumption or elimination, all necessary to human life. This reinforces that Shelley is playing with or exploring altered states of consciousness. It would seem, in some sense, that Verezzi is in fact dead, or as Hughes noted about a character in *St. Irvyne*, is someone who is not entirely human, whether fiend or otherwise, though in many ways appearing and acting human.¹⁴⁹ Bloom shared a similar reaction concerning *The Cenci*, "Shelley's Beatrice and Blake's Oothoon are either too human or not human enough; the reader is uncomfortable in not knowing whether he encounters a Titaness or one of his own kind."¹⁵⁰

In the next paragraph, Verezzi manifests feminine traits when he tries to resist his captors: "Again he struggled with his persecutors, but his enfeebled frame was insufficient to support a conflict with the strong-nerved Ugo, and, subdued, he sank fainting into his arms" (p 6). Certainly a man can faint, in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, for example, the mariner "fell into a swoon. / How long in that same fit I lay, / I have not to declare;" (Part V, ll 397-99), and again towards the end of the poem the pilot of the ship which came to rescue the mariner "shriek'd / And fell down in a fit" (Part VII, ll 593-4).¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, this scene from *Zastrozzi* seems to be describing a contemporary female response to an intimidating situation, rather than a male's attempt to battle or resist. In much of the literature of the day, it was women who fainted, particularly in a moment of crisis, and frequently during highly charged sexual scenes. For example, in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Pamela fainted during "sexual harassment or even threat of rape", and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (1761), of which Shelley was very fond, Julie fell "into a swoon during her forbidden kiss with Saint Preux."¹⁵² Shelley's audience would have been sensitive to Verezzi's fainting in Ugo's arms after a struggle, and the issues of gender and sexuality, including romantic interaction, which this scenario brings forth. As Zschrnt describes:

The image of the highly sensitive, susceptible woman overcome by her emotions, collapsing into an easy chair, leaning on the arm of a worded female friend, or falling on the breast of her future lover is certainly the most eloquent and the most

¹⁴⁸ Robert Southey: *Poetical Works*, ed. Lynda Pratt, vol. 5, 1793-1810 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004), 55.

¹⁴⁹ Hughes, *Nascent Mind*, 34.

¹⁵⁰ Bloom, *Ringers*, 104.

¹⁵¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere, In Seven Parts (1798)," *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano, NCE (New York: Norton, 2004), 58-99.

¹⁵² Christiane Zschrnt, "Fainting and Latency in the Eighteenth Century's Romantic Novel of Courtship" *The Germanic Review*, 1999, <http://www.mona.uwi.edu/liteng/courses/e32c/documents/faintingandlatencyin18thcenturyfiction.pdf> (accessed 10 March 2010), 1; Ildiko Csengei, "'She Fell Senseless on His Corpse': The Woman of Feeling and the Sentimental Swoon in Eighteenth-Century Fiction" *Romantic Psyche and Psychoanalysis, A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume*, ed. Joel Faflak, 2008 <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/psychoanalysis/csengei/csengei.html> (accessed 10 March 2010), 4.

enduring symbol of the cult of sensibility that dominated the literary scene of the second half of the eighteenth century. Fainting indicated physical fragility, vulnerability, and infirmity; but of equal importance, it referred to a mental state and hence epitomized sensibility's notion of a heightened perceptibility and emotionality in women. The fainting fit of the sentimental heroine in the eighteenth-century courtship novel is what we find when we reconstruct the history of the unconscious from a systems theoretical point of view. Fainting expresses the absence of consciousness with staggering simplicity.¹⁵³

Verezzi's extended periods of sleep also signify an absence of consciousness, coupled with the question of his recent unnamed disease and his "enfeebled frame". Csengei notes that it is "hard to find a sentimental novel without a swooning, dangerously ill or seriously distracted heroine,"¹⁵⁴ and Verezzi exhibits two of these three traits in the opening two pages of the novel. As the plot unfolds, this state metamorphoses into a period of convalescence from mental and physical illness. In fact, Verezzi spends much of the novel in bed recovering from nerves which are destroyed and a body which is nearly broken, while at the same time he manifests a youthful vigor and strength.

In Shelley's review of Thomas Jefferson Hogg's novel, *Memoirs of Prince Alexy Haimatoff: Translated from the Original Latin MSS under the Immediate Inspection of The Prince* (1813), Shelley notes that "whatever may be the claims of chastity, whatever the advantages of simple and pure affections, these ties, these benefits are of equal obligation to either sex. Domestic relations depend for their integrity upon a complete reciprocity of duties."¹⁵⁵ This review appeared anonymously in *The Critical Review* in December 1814, about four or five years after Shelley had completed *Zastrozzi*, yet perhaps Verezzi's manifestation of so-called female traits is one way that Shelley is attempting to integrate male and female roles. Or, Shelley could be ironically reversing roles in an attempt to expose gender inequality by placing a behavior on a man which was usually imposed on a woman. Mary Wollstonecraft found the limitations of female self-expression due to the cult of sensibility to be enslaving,¹⁵⁶ and Verezzi is manifesting this on two levels. First of all, he is placed in the position of being like a slave due to his kidnapping; secondly, his limited capacity for self-expression and loss of consciousness indicate a type of enslavement (as defined by Wollstonecraft) which was particularly characteristic of the eighteenth-century British and European female.

Shelley admired Mary Wollstonecraft, yet he manifests independence of thought. Although the former might not be thought to preclude the latter, the way Shelley differs from her is noteworthy. For example, according to Johnson, "Wollstonecraft has been seen as advocating masculinity in women, but the *Rights of Women* is more striking for relentlessly savaging the femininity of men". In addition, Wollstonecraft dislikes the etiquette required for smooth functioning of relationships between the sexes "on the grounds that [it is] 'effeminate' – craven, frivolous, enervated, irrational, voluptuous, given to frippery", and she finds that men have become debauched and have "surrendered their manhood". In short, the "present corrupt state of society" makes it difficult for either men or women to flourish and to

¹⁵³ Zschirnt, "Fainting," 1.

¹⁵⁴ Csengei, "'She Fell'," 3.

¹⁵⁵ B2002, 48-49.

¹⁵⁶ Csengei, "'She Fell'," 2-3.

be themselves. Wollstonecraft advocates freedom for both sexes, confident that this will bring balance and health: "Let there be then no coercion *established* in society, and the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places."¹⁵⁷ In principle, Shelley would seem to agree with her, yet Verezzi is a feminine man and a kidnap victim. His life is not his own. It is possible that Shelley is taking Wollstonecraft's ideas to a logical extreme on the one hand, in that he is demonstrating that a male is victimized by societal conventions too, though perhaps in a different way from a female; on the other hand, it is also possible that he is embellishing Wollstonecraft's concepts in his own way, taking her advocacy of a greater level of freedom for both sexes and applying it to sexual freedom. While Wollstonecraft wants men to reclaim their manhood by becoming more masculine, Shelley finds the characteristics which define masculinity and femininity limiting: he prefers an androgynous approach.¹⁵⁸ Sedgwick details how "the Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality,"¹⁵⁹ and Shelley is exploring this too.

One may wonder if he is being ironic or sarcastic, and perhaps he is; perhaps this is part of the "quick schoolboy fame" the critics mention, but there is a tone of sincerity concerning Verezzi and his situation in these opening pages. Miles would "argue strongly that these crosscurrents of sex and gender, biology and genre, are crucial to an understanding of Gothic writing."¹⁶⁰ This book was begun while Shelley was at Eton, and his own experiences there as a new student may be on his mind. It seems safe to say that the character of Verezzi, at least, is far from being a "standard cardboard figure of the genre", and that the action, while dramatic and swift, encompasses a variety of issues which would remain dear to Shelley throughout his lifetime. Moreover, Punter's statement that Verezzi has lost his wits is not borne out by the text, for when Verezzi is not in his weakened state he exhibits dynamic health and physical and mental vigor. Shelley's Verezzi is far from mentally disturbed. He is alert, clear and astute. Although the paragraphs are short, they are often direct and to the point, in particular concerning the injustice of Verezzi's imprisonment. For example, one paragraph consists of only this one sentence: "Everything was denied him but thought, which, by comparing the present with the past, was his greatest torment" (p 7). A little later there is another:

In vain did he implore mercy, pity, and even death: useless were all his enquiries concerning the cause of his barbarous imprisonment – a stern silence was maintained by his relentless gaoler (p 7).

¹⁵⁷ Claudia L. Johnson, "From The Distinction of the Sexes," *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft*, 3rd ed., ed. Deidre Shauna Lynch, NCE (New York: Norton, 2009), 363.

¹⁵⁸ See Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1979); Brown, "The 'Double Soul'," 182-204; Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in 19th-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 284-311.

¹⁵⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 91.

¹⁶⁰ Miles, *Gothic Writing* 2nd ed., 7.

VI

Shelley also confounds the traditional concept of the feminine in this novel, and this can be traced, possibly, back to the influence of the Marquis de Sade. Textual references in Shelley's novels point to a strong possibility that he was aware of Sade's writings by the time he wrote them in 1809. It seems that Shelley was influenced not only by Sade's work, but also by the events of his life, including his days in the Bastille at the height of the French Revolution. Both are brilliant satirists, with Sade exhibiting a "darkly humorous flavor which, in the French, pervades his every scene."¹⁶¹ Shelley's lyrics are particularly lilting and sweet, yet they also possess a dark side. In spite of Sade's years in captivity, at the start of the twentieth century, Apollinaire called him "the freest spirit that ever lived."¹⁶² Certainly Shelley was striving for such freedom as well. Yet this is a difficult point to prove due to the danger of reading Sade at that time, and of acknowledging having read him even privately.

Scholars have also referred to Rosa Matilda's females as Sadean.¹⁶³ It was Algernon Charles Swinburne who first noticed this connection. In a letter written to H. Buxton Forman on November 22, 1886, he writes:

The action [of *Zofloya*] is concerned wholly with the Misfortunes of Virtue in the person of 'the innocent Lilla' (who is generally undergoing incarceration and varieties of torment throughout the course of her blameless but comfortless career) and the Prosperities of Vice in the person of 'the fiendish Victoria,' who ultimately succeeds in accomplishing the vivisection of virtue by hewing her amiable victim into more or less minute though palpitating fragments.¹⁶⁴

Three editions of *Justine or The Misfortunes of Virtue* (*Justine, ou Les Malheurs de la Vertu*) were published in Paris during Sade's lifetime. All of them were published anonymously, and Sade always denied authorship, though it was well known who wrote them. The first appeared in 1791, the second in 1792, and the third and final version, which was "Corrected and Augmented", was published in 1794. In addition, in 1797 a new book was published anonymously in Paris, entitled *The New Justine or The Misfortunes of Virtue, followed by a History of her sister, Juliette* (*La Nouvelle Justine, ou les Malheurs de la Vertu, suivie de l'Histoire de Juliette sa soeur*). One more of Sade's libertine texts, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (*La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*) was published in his lifetime. Two editions appeared, both in London in 1795, though the publishers are unknown. He also wrote a novel, *Aline and Valcour* (*Aline et Valcour, ou le roman philosophique*), published in his name in Paris in 1795, and some short stories which were published in Paris in 1800 (and later) in his name though the date and publisher are unknown, entitled *The Crimes of Love* (*Amis du Crime*).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Paul J. Gillette, note for scholars in *The Complete Marquis de Sade*, trans. Paul J. Gillette, 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Holloway, 1966), 1:43.

¹⁶² Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Diables Amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

¹⁶³ Adriana Craciun, introduction to *Zofloya; or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Adriana Craciun (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1997), 9-32; Michasiw, introduction to *Zofloya*, vii-xxx; Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 111.

¹⁶⁴ Craciun, introduction to *Zofloya*, 9, 29.

¹⁶⁵ Paul J. Gillette, bibliography in *Complete de Sade*, 2:314-320.

Embedded within *Philosophy in the Bedroom* was a political pamphlet, “YET ANOTHER EFFORT, FRENCHMEN, BEFORE YOU CALL YOURSELVES REPUBLICANS”, and he inserted an essay on the novel (*Idée sur les Romans*) as a preface to *The Crimes of Love*. In this essay, “Sade outlined the history of the novel or tale, as he saw it, and went to great lengths to explain his high moral purpose.”¹⁶⁶ In *The Crimes of Love*, there were “eleven stories in all, each volume with an engraving and a quotation from the poet Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, popular in France at the time.”¹⁶⁷ (See Plates 1 & 2.) Some of these stories are Gothic in nature, “written possibly under the influence of English writers such as Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto* was translated in 1767.”¹⁶⁸ Other influences on Sade (aside from the philosophers, with whom he was well versed), include “the writers who had so impressed him when young, Voltaire, Rousseau, Prevost and his English hero Samuel Richardson.”¹⁶⁹ This publication data demonstrates that Shelley and Rosa Matilda could have gotten access to Sade’s writings, and therefore the influence which Swinburne so quickly identified in *Zofloya* filtered down to Shelley, not only through *Zofloya* but also through Sade himself. (One wonders if Sade ever saw any of Shelley’s or Rosa Matilda’s novels prior to his death in December 1814.)

To help understand the possible route of circulation, and the timeline of publication of the books by all three authors, along with performance dates of Sade’s play, *Oxtiern*, diagrams are inserted here.

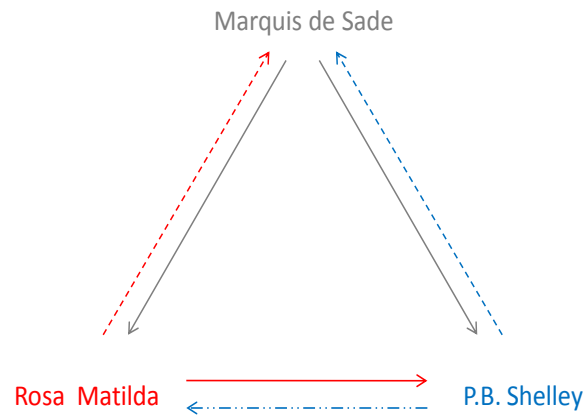
¹⁶⁶ Margaret Crosland, introduction to *The Crimes of Love*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Peter Owen, 1996), 12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶⁸ Margaret Crosland, introduction to *The Gothic Tales of the Marquis de Sade*, trans. Margaret Crosland (London: Pan Books, 1992), 9.

¹⁶⁹ Crosland, introduction to *Crimes*, 11.

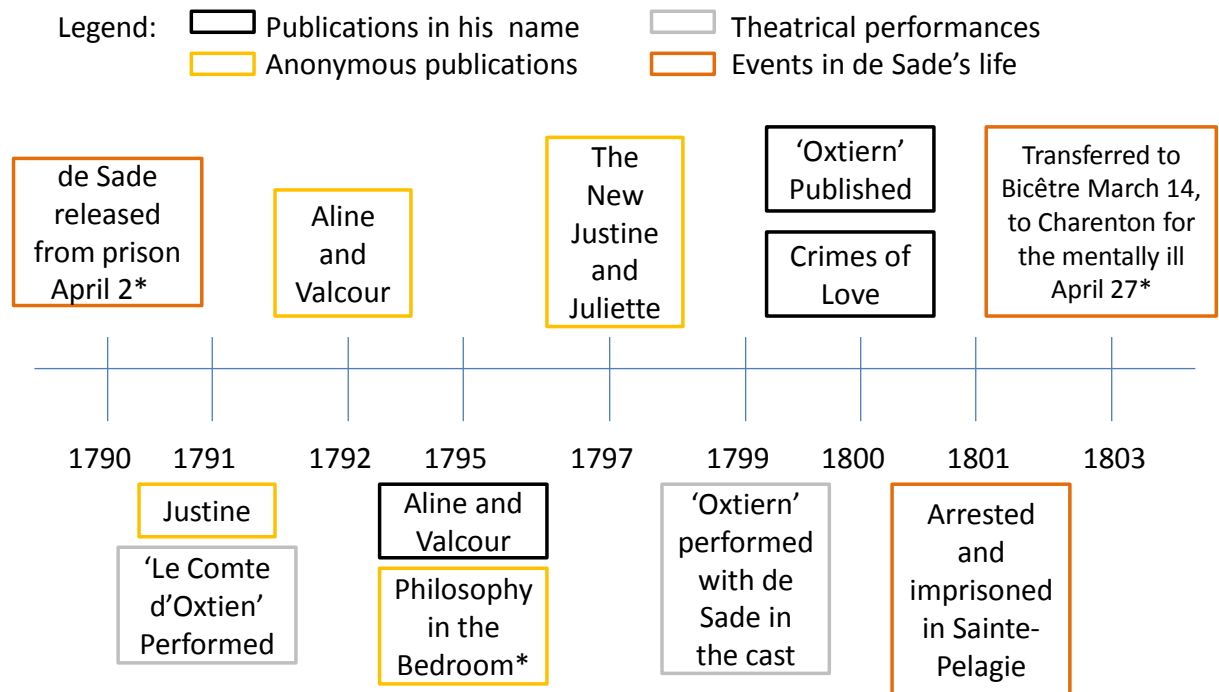
Diagram 1
Channels of Communication



Legend:

——— certain
----- speculation
-.-.-.-.- probable

Diagram 2.1
Marquis de Sade Publication and Performance Timeline

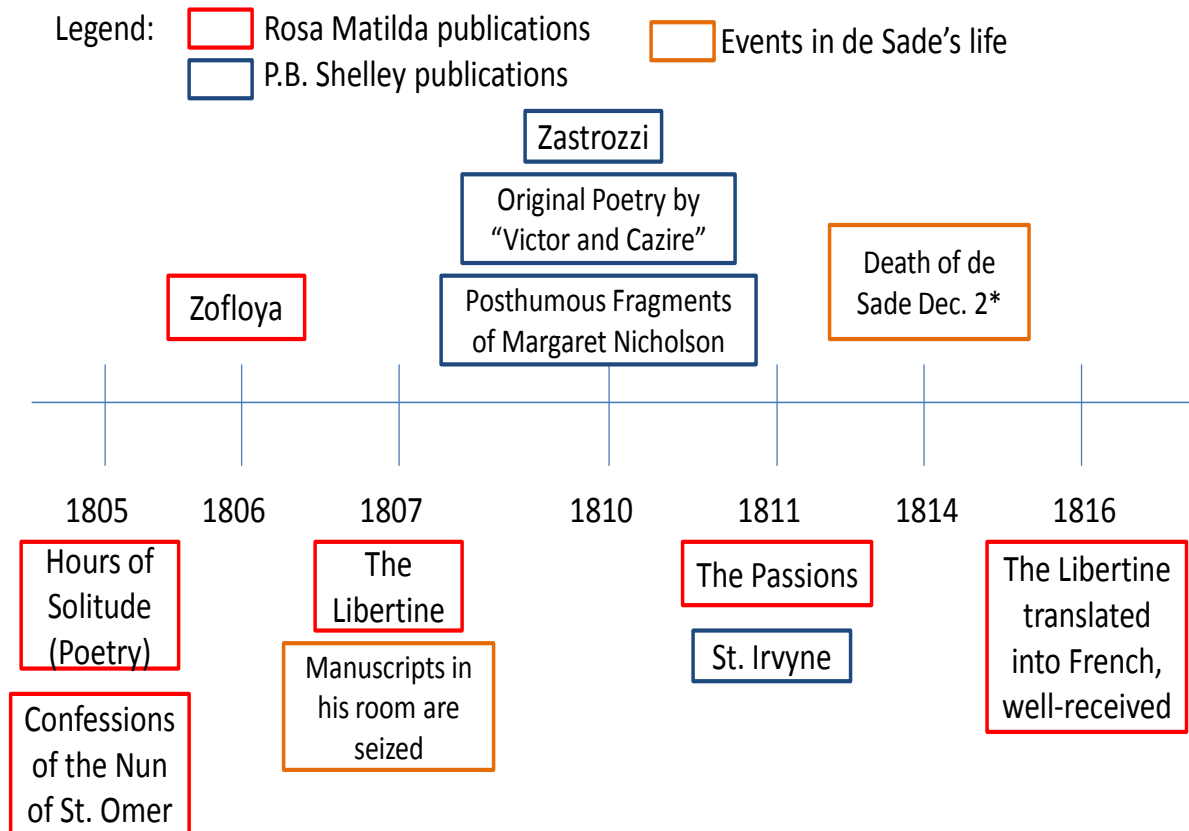


*(1790) Abolition of lettre de cachet

*(1795) Announced as a posthumous work by the author of Justine

*(1803) wrote, directed and acted in plays performed by the inmates until banned shortly before his death

Diagram 2.2
Rosa Matilda Publication Timeline
P.B. Shelley Publication Timeline through 1816



**(1814) After his death, his son Donatien-Claude Armande asked the police to burn Les Journées de Florbelle (a monumental work of ten notebooks or more) and they complied.*

Moreover, there was communication between private parties in England and France which disseminated information about Sade and his strange behavior. For example, Madame du Deffand wrote letters to Horace Walpole in April 1768 explaining an incident which had just occurred involving Sade and a woman named Rosa Keller. While much speculation exists concerning this event, Madame du Deffand's account is considered by experts to be the most reliable.¹⁷⁰ In exploring the meaning of *Zastrozzi* and its relationship with the novels of Rosa Matilda, among other influences, connections to the Marquis de Sade recur with remarkable frequency. It is important to explore them because issues of gender have already appeared in Shelley's novels, and experts exert that, in such novels, "violence, murder and incest [are] linked symbiotically with issues of sexuality and gender."¹⁷¹ Craciun has argued that *Zofloya, or the Moor*, has more in common with writers such as Lewis, Rousseau, and Sade, rather than with Ann Radcliffe or Charlotte Smith, although Shelley admired Radcliffe too.¹⁷² Reviewers were distressed by this novel in particular because its aggressive stance was written by a female author.¹⁷³ Shelley, on the other hand, not only has pugnacious female characters in his novels, he also portrays mild-mannered males. While some of the overlap may be purely coincidental, it could also be attributed to these authors articulating a response to the times, and to the controversies Mary Wollstonecraft had raised. The Marquis de Sade himself felt that such novels were "the inevitable fruit of the revolutionary shocks felt by the whole of Europe."¹⁷⁴

In Henry James' unfinished "autobiographical reminiscences to which he had given the name of one of his own short stories, *The Middle Years*,"¹⁷⁵ there is an anecdote about the Marquis de Sade. The Marquis' name had come up in conversation, and a member of the party (as relayed by the narrator, James) proceeded to describe him at length as "the scandalous, the long ignored, the at last all but unnameable author [who had numerous] titles to infamy, among which that of his most notorious work was pronounced."¹⁷⁶ The narrator, James, concludes with a sardonic comment that the speaker "struck me in truth as neither knowing nor communicating knowledge" about de Sade.¹⁷⁷ Summers concurs that "Where possible he [de Sade] has been tacitly ignored; but when it was inevitable that his name should be mentioned, he has been uniformly covered with excess of obloquy and abuse by those . . . who never read a word of his writings nor troubled to comprehend the smallest fragment of his philosophy."¹⁷⁸ Summers finds him, however, worthy of consideration:

And yet de Sade was a writer, a critic, and a philosopher of no mean order. His works contain, it is true, much that is extravagant, much that is diffuse, much that is fantastically erotic, but in spite of all his faults and impudicities, he remains a figure of vital interest, and surely as such may be impartially and dispassionately

¹⁷⁰ Summers, *Essays*, 88-89; Gillette, forward to *Complete de Sade*, 33.

¹⁷¹ Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 147.

¹⁷² Craciun, *Fatal Women*, 111, 134-135, 145.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 113, citing the review of *Zofloya* in *The Annual Review*, 5 (1806), p. 542.

¹⁷⁴ *Selected Writings of De Sade*, trans. Leonard de Saint-Yves (London: Peter Owen, 1953), 287.

¹⁷⁵ Percy Lubbock, editor's note to Henry James, *The Middle Years*, ed. Percy Lubbock (1917; Project Gutenberg, 2010), <http://archive.org/stream/themiddleyears32649gut/pg32649.txt> (accessed 1 February 2013).

¹⁷⁶ James, *The Middle Years*, Section VI.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Summers, *Essays*, 78.

considered without any palliative condonation of his obscenity or necessary embracing of his philosophical ideas. To students of sexual psychology he is undeniably of prime importance. For, . . . it is his name that has been give to . . . 'one of the most difficult problems, and yet one of the most fundamental, in the whole range of sexual psychology' – the relationship of love to pain.¹⁷⁹

Crosland notes that "in the early twentieth century, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire . . . studied Sade and . . . has remained one of his most perceptive interpreters . . . [who] realized that here was one of the most misunderstood writers of the eighteenth century, condemned by critics who had failed to see him in a social, psychological and political context. Later, in Britain, Aldous Huxley noted that the works of the Marquis contained 'more philosophy than pornography'."¹⁸⁰ Shelley and Rosa Matilda seem to have grasped this right away. Crosland finds Sade relevant in the modern era: "Nearly two hundred years have gone by since Sade published his eleven 'heroic and tragic tales', with the quotation from Young which questioned why love, which was intended to produce happiness, should bring about crimes, and why men abuse everything. That problem has not yet been solved."¹⁸¹ This is a seminal issue in Shelley's novels.

In 1953, Simone de Beauvoir wrote an essay defending Sade when his works were still banned in France. (In early 1957, the publishing house of Jean-Jacques Pauvert would be judged guilty of publishing illicit books for having published his four libertine works.) Beauvoir offers her perspective:

he is trying to communicate an experience whose distinguishing characteristic is, nevertheless, its will to remain incommunicable. . . . Can we, without renouncing our individuality, satisfy our aspirations to universality? Or is it only by the sacrifice of our individual difference that we can integrate ourselves into the community? This problem concerns us all. In de Sade the differences are carried to the point of outrageousness, and the immensity of his literary effort shows how passionately he wished to be accepted by the human community. Thus we find in his work the most extreme form of the conflict from which no individual can escape without self-deception. It is the paradox and, in a sense, the triumph of de Sade that his persistent singularity helps us to define the human drama in its general aspect. . . . The supreme value of his testimony is the fact that it disturbs us. It forces us to re-examine thoroughly the basic problem which haunts our age in different forms: the true relation between man and man.¹⁸²

This is another matter with which Shelley was deeply concerned. That the Marquis appears to have impacted both Rosa Matilda and Shelley seems fairly certain to me; nevertheless, as mentioned at the start of this section, it is difficult to prove that Shelley got his hands on the books. I exerted a great deal of energy in attempting to confirm my suspicion, and the following section explains that process.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Crosland, introduction to *Tales*, 8.

¹⁸¹ Crosland, introduction to *Crimes*, 13.

¹⁸² Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn Sade?*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Peter Nevill, 1953), 10-11, 89.

VII

Accurately tracing the circulation of clandestine books in the 1790s and early 1800s is a difficult task. Even so, the fact is that Sade's books, some of which included woodblock prints, were published and circulated. These have been preserved, but, to put it mildly, how they circulated in England in the early years is nearly impossible to trace. Kevin Gilmartin, who has studied the circulation of proscribed works in the political sphere, notes that "radical print culture was a diffuse and overlapping set of practices that extended from writing to printing, publishing, and bookselling, and to oral forms of communication as well."¹⁸³ The circulation networks of blasphemous or sexually prohibited materials were necessarily more surreptitious, as can be seen from the lack of traceable records. Extrapolating from Gilmartin, it seems fair to say that such material often passed from hand to hand, with no one mentioning it in a letter or diary for fear of a reprisal. Thus, while extremely difficult to pinpoint, it is not unreasonable to assert that seditious and sexually provocative books were being shared and read. The upper classes are the ones who would have been reading Sade, in general, and Shelley's friends at Sion House and Eton might have known a French person or had a relative who brought them the book from France, Switzerland or Holland. This is how it is believed that Jane Austen might have gotten a copy of Choderlos de Laclos' *Les liaisons dangereuses*, which appears to have been a model for *Lady Susan*, though scholars are divided in opinion as to whether this actually happened or not.¹⁸⁴

R. F. Brissenden's *Virtue in Distress* offers an interesting discussion of Jane Austen's early writings and their Sadean tendencies, though the earliest ones, such as 'Love and Friendship', written by her at fourteen years of age in 1789, could not possibly have been influenced by Sade as *Justine* was not published until 1791.¹⁸⁵ This indicates that Austen, Matthew Lewis (in an early parody not published until many years later), Shelley, and Sade from the Bastille, were each responding in their own way to societal forces, unbeknownst to one another. Once *Justine* was published, it is not inconceivable that that novel influenced their later works, including *The Monk*, *Zastrozzi*, *St. Irvyne*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. As Knight-Roth points out, "What was considered inflammatory fiction, works such as *The Monk* by Lewis, were sharply criticized but very widely read."¹⁸⁶

Gilmartin has indicated that dangerous books passed secretly and privately from hand to hand, and no one would record having read them, out of fear. Criminal liability was not attached to writing but to publication, and the libel law was designed to combat "publication, distribution, and reception as well as composition."¹⁸⁷ If data were recorded in a private diary, such as the wonderful diary of Samuel Pepys from the 17th century, it has yet to be found or published. Sade's works are particularly challenging in this regard. They inspired fear in even the most daring rebel or privileged aristocrat because they were so incriminating. This can be seen from the sedulous efforts of Leslie A. Marchand in his detailed

¹⁸³ Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 68.

¹⁸⁴ Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 128-129, 215n15.

¹⁸⁵ R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 279-282.

¹⁸⁶ Sandra Knight-Roth, "Charlotte Dacre and the Gothic Tradition" (master's thesis, Dalhousie University, 1972), 78.

¹⁸⁷ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, 120.

biography of Lord Byron. Marchand mentions that Byron kept *Justine* in a trunk at the time he was having difficulty with his wife, who was worried that Byron was suffering from mental health problems. Lady Byron apparently went through the trunk and found it, and this embarrassed even the unflappable Byron. According to Marchand, Hobhouse states:

Her Ladyship thought she was only doing her duty in investigating *him* and *his* in search of those singularities and obliquities, which she conceived were the proofs and features of that particular insanity under which he labored. His *drawers* and *trunks*, and *letter-cases*, were the objects of research – in one place, which his Lordship certainly did not intend for the inspection even of his wife, was found a small bottle of laudanum – and in the same place a few volumes of a work which as a curiosity might be kept, but which was certainly not fit for an open library . . .¹⁸⁸

Marchand continues this train of thought in the following footnote:

Hobhouse later recorded in his diary (entry for April 26, 1816): ‘I know she looked at a trunk in which B. kept his black drop [laudanum] and *Justine*. Mrs. L[eigh] confessed this.’ The book, which, Byron told Medwin, ‘did not do much credit to my taste in literature’ (Medwin, I, 45), seems to have been the Marquis de Sade’s famous suppressed novel *Justine*. Lady Byron would have considered this fact to be ample confirmation of her notions concerning her husband’s depraved if not deranged mind.¹⁸⁹

Interestingly, use of laudanum is recorded from those days far more frequently than owning or reading *Justine*. Marchand does not indicate when or where or how Byron may have procured the book, but thankfully he has confirmed that a copy was on British soil prior to April 1816, the earliest one on record. Byron loved the risqué as well as being part of the avant-garde, but the chances are that he was not alone in having a copy of this book.

Iain McCalman in *Radical Underworld* places Sade’s *Juliette* in London in French in 1830. McCalman notes that at “the end of the 1820s Rev. Erasmus Perkins was editing, translating and publishing books” of an erotic or obscene nature under pseudonyms, and in 1831 he was convicted for doing so. One of these was “so explosive that he did not dare translate it from the French. This was *Juliette, ou les prosperities du vice*, the first of the Marquis de Sade’s writings to surface in England.” McCalman’s sources include the King’s Bench Records of 1830, articles in *The Times* in December of 1830 and January and February of 1831, and the Latin titles *Index librorum prohibitorum* and *Catena librorum tacendorum* of 1885 under the pseudonym Pisanus Fraxi which was used by Henry Spencer Ashbee in compiling his vast collection of pornography and other sexually illicit works.¹⁹⁰ This is a helpful set of data, but it is in the public sphere, including newspaper articles and records of prosecution. Long before things got to that point, works of the Marquis’ had been circulating underhandedly in England, quietly, secretly, and potentially into the hands of the young Percy Bysshe Shelley.

¹⁸⁸ Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 2:559.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:559n1.

¹⁹⁰ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, (Oxford: CP, 1988), 204, 286n1.

Experts in illicit book circulation during the French Revolution, including Robert Darnton and Carla Hesse, do not provide data on Sade's books in England.¹⁹¹ A recently discovered novel published in 1790 by the Marquis de Pelleport and resurfacing due to the efforts of Darnton, *Les Bohémiens*, is unable to shed light on Sade because *Justine* did not appear until 1791. *The Erotomaniac*, a book on Henry Spencer Ashbee's secret collection of erotic fiction in the Victorian era shed no light on the matter either.¹⁹² Even book shipments from Holland or Switzerland may not be helpful as they may have been doctored, so perhaps the best chance is the recovery of a diary of some kind. For now, everyone is mute but Lord Byron, thanks to Marchand's intrepid reporting. Together they form a reliable and heavenly source. Therefore, research conducted on books from this era which discuss the Marquis de Sade rely upon textual evidence, rather than actual proof. For example, a 2002 study entitled *Shelley's Textual Seductions, Plotting Utopia in the Erotic and Political Works* by Samuel Lyndon Gladden discusses many of Shelley's works in relation to the Marquis de Sade, yet Gladden admits, "Evidence of Shelley's ownership of Sade's works so far has remained uncovered."¹⁹³

Yet Shelley dropped strong hints, particularly in *St. Irvyne*. For example, Chapter VII begins the story of Eloise de St. Irvyne, explaining events "which, since five years, had so darkly tinged the fate of the unsuspecting female, who trusted to the promises of man" (p 156). She has an elder sister, Marianne, from whom she gets separated at the time of their mother's death. Eloise accompanies her mother to Geneva where Madame de St. Irvyne dies; Madame had not wanted Marianne to come as well. Eloise then gets embroiled in a series of difficult situations before she can return to Marianne, but in fact even this is confusing, because it appears there are two endings to this part of the story, one where she goes happily to England, the other where she returns to the Château de St. Irvyne in despair. Echoing Sade's *Justine*, the narrator states:

Who will listen with pity to the narrative of her woe, and heal the wounds which the selfish unkindness of man hath made, and then sent her with them, unbound, on the wide and pitiless world? . . . Poor Eloise de St. Irvyne! many, many are in thy situation; but few have a heart so full of sensibility and excellence for the demoniac malice of man to deform, and then glut itself with hellish pleasure in the conviction of having ravaged the most lovely of the works of their Creator (p 155-156).

Some five years later, Eloise winds up back at the Château de St. Irvyne, in France, where she is reunited with her sister (according to one ending). This is very similar to what happened to *Justine* and *Juliette*, with Eloise playing the part of *Justine*, because after many horrifying episodes, *Justine* is at last reunited with *Juliette* (Marianne), they recognize one another, and *Juliette* helps *Justine*. Chapter IX of *St. Irvyne* (pp 172-179) is a chapter in which Shelley tells part of Eloise's tale, and he breaks the narrative

¹⁹¹ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1982); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1996); Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁹² The Marquis de Pelleport, *Les Bohémiens*, Édition présentée et anotée par Robert Darnton. (Mayenne: Mercure de France, 2010); Ian Gibson, *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

¹⁹³ Samuel Lyndon Gladden, *Shelley's Textual Seductions: Plotting Utopia in the Erotic and Political Works* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 39n23.

to directly address libertines in a moralizing tone, carefully and intentionally drawing attention to the influence of the Marquis de Sade by imitating his style, rather than by naming him directly. In Chapter XI of *St. Irvyne* (pp 193-197), Shelley does so again in discussing Epicureans and Stoics, and explains the difference between *pleasure* and *happiness*. It is *happiness* that Shelley seeks. This type of philosophizing, which occurs in all of the chapters that deal with Eloise, is reminiscent of Sade, because he is famous for the long philosophical expostulations which accompany his black humor.

The entire story of Eloise is wrapped up with that of Justine. It also plays on earlier novels of sensibility, such as Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, novels which Sade loved and was influenced by. It is unwise to underestimate the irony or complexity Shelley is demonstrating here. Part of the reason the plot of *St. Irvyne* breaks down may be because he is unable to tie all of the threads together of the different stories which he opens up. Moreover, it is worth noting that Shelley was not the only one struggling with issues of plot:

As a word, it has, in fact, been out of fashion since the anthropocentric surge of Romantic thought when the freedom to write plotlessly was, at least apparently, urged: the composing artist . . . was above all not an artisan arranging action according to a tight causal pattern of beginning, middle and end. Tristram Shandy as narrator expresses his freedom with characteristic bluntness: 'I should beg Mr Horace's pardon – for in writing what I have set about I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived.'¹⁹⁴

There is also some wordplay. The character that succeeds in destroying Eloise's honor is named Nempere. In French, *père* is father, *mon père*, my father, and Nempere could be a slight wordplay on that, similar to Jonathan Swift's technique of using wordplay in *Gulliver's Travels* by mixing up letters to come up with names for 'Dublin' and 'London' such as 'Lindalino' and 'Glubbdbudrib'; 'Houyhnhnm' and 'Yahoo' for 'human' and 'you'.¹⁹⁵ Shelley may be acknowledging Sade's predilection for father/daughter incest in his novels.

¹⁹⁴ Elizabeth Dippler, *Plot* (London: Methuen, 1970), 1.

¹⁹⁵ Robert DeMaria, Jr, ed. introduction and notes to Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Penguin, 2001), xxi.

VIII

One of the ways that some of the female characters in *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* manifest Sadistic tendencies is in their willingness to kill without remorse. Sade's Juliette killed with no motive, but Shelley's characters usually possess a motive. For females it tends to be a desire to obtain or keep a man they love; for males it can also be attached to that same thing or to other ambitions. Matilda, in *Zastrozzi*, wants Julia dead purely because Verezzi has committed himself to her, and Matilda is upset that anyone dare compete with her for Verezzi's hand, though Verezzi himself loved Julia first. Matilda feels that as long as Julia is alive, Verezzi will never be hers completely. She is ruthless in her willingness to carry this through. In *St. Irvyne*, Magalena asks Wolfstein to kill Olympia because Olympia, a young maiden, has fallen in love with him and is so bold as to say so. This ties back to the discussion of relations between the sexes discussed earlier, and how these are imbalanced and unhealthy. According to Csengei, "openly expressing emotions that related to sexuality was one of the greatest prohibitions affecting women,"¹⁹⁶ and for Shelley, it also indicates that when a person expresses his or her heart's desire in the context of the current societal conventions, death may result.

Needless to say, revenge is a main theme of these novels. Punter astutely sees Matilda as manifesting qualities of the Medusa, for the doctor warns her at one point not to let Verezzi see her, as simply seeing her may kill him.¹⁹⁷ This shows that Matilda's power is functioning on a mythic level. She is very dangerous, while Julia is virtually absent from the text until the ending. Perhaps not surprisingly, in Shelley's fragment 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery', Medusa is continually referred to throughout the poem as 'it'; only in the final stanza does Shelley refer to the Medusa as 'she'. These qualities appear *en pleine forme* in *The Cenci*.

After the lengthy discussion of Sade, it is necessary to provide a few specific examples of ways in which the text may be seen to be following his example to complement the thematic congruencies which are apparent. The first one occurs in the opening scene of *Zastrozzi*, which is a kidnap scene out of the blue. Shelley's opening appears to come straight from a scene in *Juliette*, in which Juliette performs a rare good deed by aiding a man named Mr. Lubin, and is subsequently kidnapped and placed in a dungeon for it. (Her charity is partly self-serving, for she also uses him to satisfy her sexual desire.) Sade sets up the scene humorously and adroitly:

In the days which followed I made fewer and fewer appointments and began devoting more and more time to the arts. I read all the great books, viewed all the great operas and scrutinized every picture in the Palais Luxembourg. Unfortunately, however, one afternoon I made the mistake in that museum of spending far too long admiring a Titian; it was a mistake which almost cost me my life.

How could this happen? What peril could there be in examining a painting? Do you wonder, dear reader? Alas, the peril was not in examining the marvelous artwork but in being recognized while I was doing so. The man who recognized me

¹⁹⁶ Csengei, "'She Fell'," 3.

¹⁹⁷ Punter, *Pathologies*, 70.

was none other than – (the reader will surely recall him) – Lubin, the handsome valet of the Duke of Stern (Vol. II, p 77). (See Plates 3 & 4.)

At this point, Lubin tells her of the difficulties he is having with the Duke, and how his life is in tatters: “I can’t work, I’ve been reduced to begging on the streets, my life is constantly in peril, three days have passed since I’ve had a morsel to eat . . . by heaven, dear Juliette, that’s what I’ve come to. Can you help me?” (Vol. II, p 77). She agrees, and takes him home where she feeds him, gives him two suits and some spending money, and sends him “on his way, very happy with myself for having brightened his life” (Vol. II, p 78). Two days later during her evening stroll she is kidnapped, bound, blindfolded, forced into a carriage and taken to a dungeon by orders of the Duke of Stern. In the carriage she is hit by a hard blow which makes her faint. She is left alone in the dungeon for thirty-six hours without food or water, during which time she resolves not to help anyone ever again. At last she is rescued by her lover and partner in crime, Noirceuil, who refuses any gratitude, claiming that he did so for his own self-satisfaction, not to be of service to her. Sade at this point explains, through Noirceuil, the perils of virtue (Vol. II, pp 78-80). There are parallel situations in *Justine* as well, for Justine is captured and held against her will many times, but this particular example in *Juliette* is closer to what Verezzi experiences, and is followed by Sade’s philosophical statement and Juliette’s submission to a life of evil, since she is rewarded for doing so, which brings up the very issues Shelley is contemplating. (A note on Noirceuil’s name: ‘noir’ means ‘black’ and ‘recueil’ is an ‘author’s collection’, and thus his name signifies an author’s ‘Black Collection’.)

A second example occurs a bit later in the opening chapter:

Not long did the hapless victim of unmerited persecution enjoy an oblivion which deprived him of a knowledge of his horrible situation. He awoke – and overcome by excess of terror, started violently from the ruffians’ arms.

They had now entered the cavern – Verezzi supported himself against a fragment of rock which jutted out.

“Resistance is useless,” exclaimed Zastrozzi; “following us in submissive silence can alone procure the slightest mitigation of your punishment” (p 6).

The exchange about resistance and submission is similar to a passage from *Justine*: “We tolerate no resistance here . . . complete submissiveness is what we want, and we’ll settle for nothing less” (Vol. I, p 137).

A third connection is the fact that Verezzi is chained naked in a cave and left alone as a prisoner, not unlike the victims of sexual perversion that de Sade detailed. Shelley scrupulously avoids describing any graphic sexual interaction, but Verezzi’s circumstances alone hint at it. Had Shelley chosen not to strip Verezzi of his clothing, it would be harder to associate this with the Marquis de Sade, but that one detail is indicative that Shelley is not simply thinking of a Promethean figure, or a victim of the Reign of Terror or the Inquisition, but a Sadean one. (It should also be mentioned that Verezzi exhibits Christ-like qualities, and Jesus himself was stripped naked by his enemies in the Bible.) Moreover, the Marquis’ radicalism, his atheism, his dislike of war and the death penalty, his tolerance of homosexuality, his

disapproval of marriage, his admiration for Hellenism, and his desire for a strong French republic free from superstition and the dictates of the church, all would have appealed to Shelley.¹⁹⁸

A fourth can be seen in the description of Verezzi's escape scene, compared with one of Justine's many escape scenes (this is a critical one for her, as her friend did not escape and died). Here is *Zastrozzi*:

Not waiting to see the event of his victory, he rushed through the opposite door, and meeting with no opposition, ran swiftly across the heath.

The moon, in tranquil majesty, hung high in the air, and showed the immense extent of the plain before him. He continued rapidly advancing, and the cottage was soon out of sight. He thought that he heard Zastrozzi's voice in every gale. Turning round, he thought Zastrozzi's eye glanced over his shoulder. But even had Bianca taken the right road, and found Zastrozzi, Verezzi's speed would have mocked pursuit (pp 14-15).

Here is *Justine*:

The large oak door was ajar; Justine seized it at the handle and, then, without looking to either side of her, she dashed out into the night – and freedom.

The night was cold and clear. A high, yellow moon gave the snow-frosted countryside a sparkling, silvery glow. Sprinting across the road in front of the monastery, Justine plunged into the woods; then, keeping to the shadows of the trees, she made her way slowly along the path toward the highway from which she had first spotted the Benedictine's bell tower.

It was almost dawn when she emerged on the highway. Pausing for an instant, she listened for footsteps in the woods. Then, satisfied that no one had followed her, she began the long trek toward Paris (Vol. I, pp 160-161).

Recognizing the textual connections between Shelley's early novels and those of the Marquis de Sade demonstrates Shelley's boldness, because writings by the Marquis were forbidden. Moreover, a majority of critics may feel that it was Lord Byron who introduced Sade to Shelley, but according to my research, it seems to have happened much earlier.

Yet influences from the Marquis de Sade do not function in isolation. They are deeply interwoven in the fabric of the text, which quickly becomes infinitely more complex, involving both Promethean and Christian imagery in the opening chapter after the kidnap scene. In the original 1810 edition, Shelley placed a quote on the title page:

----- That their God
May prove their foe, and, with repenting hand
Abolish his own works—This would surpass
Common revenge.

PARADISE LOST.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Gillette, ed., *Complete de Sade*, 1:274-294.

¹⁹⁹ B1986, 3.

The quote is from Book II, in which Satan and the fallen angels debate the best way to retake Heaven. Instead of risking another battle, they determine to find out the truth about the rumors of a new world inhabited by man, as recommended by Beelzebub, who was second in power only to Satan at the Infernal Council. Satan volunteers to go alone in search of this world. The quote Shelley uses is part of Beelzebub's speech urging the fallen angels to find this new world (though Milton indicates that the idea was first concocted by Satan):

. . . .here perhaps
Some advantageous act may be achieved
By sudden onset, either with hell fire
To waste his whole creation, or possess
All as our own, and drive as we were driven,
The puny inhabitants, or if not drive
Seduce them to our party that their God
May prove their foe, and, with repenting hand
Abolish his own works. This would surpass
Common revenge, and interrupt his joy
In our confusion, and our joy upraise
In his disturbance; when his darling sons
Hurled headlong to partake with us, shall curse
Their frail originals, and faded bliss,
Faded so soon. Advise if this be worth
Attempting, or to sit in darkness here
Hatching vain empires. Thus Beelzebub
Pleaded his devilish counsel, first devised
By Satan, and in part proposed: for whence
But from the author of all ill could spring
So deep a malice, to confound the race
Of mankind in one root, and earth with hell
To mingle and involve, done all to spite
The great creator? (Bk. II, ll 362-385)²⁰⁰

Behrendt notes that this plan for getting revenge upon God “anticipates the sort of guerilla warfare that the Creature will wage on Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.”²⁰¹ This is true, and the quote is also relevant to *Zastrozzi*. Its main thrust is the mingling of earth with hell, and the spiteful destruction of human happiness by an evil force for the sake of selfish interest. This brings in questions of divine authority, justice, governance and human suffering, all of which reverberate with the Marquis de Sade.

²⁰⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed., ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2007), 126-128.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 202n3; also in B2002, 59.

IX

Before proceeding, it would be wise to look at the language of some of Shelley's early letters, because these letters offer a profound example of the challenges I have faced throughout my research. Accurately determining what Shelley's true feelings were, and even ascertaining the truth of certain events is not easy, and Shelley himself is one of the major culprits. For example, the letters written by Shelley to Godwin in 1812 are frequently quoted to prove that Shelley had "given up being a votary of Romance" and was now a disciple of Godwin. The first, written on January 3, 1812, was a letter written out of the blue by Shelley introducing himself to Godwin. Its opening line is, "You will be surprised at hearing from a stranger", and the goal is to establish a friendship with Godwin out of a desire for universal happiness.²⁰² In the second letter, written on January 10, 1812, there are many errors on Shelley's part. Repeatedly the editor, Frederick L. Jones, makes corrections or qualifications to Shelley's statements, such as, "Shelley is rather given to exaggerating his youthfulness"; "but certainly not 'more than two years' ago"; "there is no evidence to support this statement"; and "There is no evidence by which to verify this assertion."²⁰³ One of the big problems is accurately determining when Shelley first read Godwin, as Shelley confuses that in this series of letters. Nevertheless, these letters are cited by critics to confirm a change in Shelley's thinking, as though their accuracy were impeccable. It is necessary to examine them carefully.

Although Shelley states in the letter of January 10, 1812 that he was ashamed of his novels, he continues, "I shall desire them to be sent to you; do not however consider this as any obligation to yourself to misapply your valuable time."²⁰⁴ In a subsequent letter only a few days later, he reiterates, "I have desired the publications of my earlier youth to be sent to you, you will perceive that *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* were written prior to my acquaintance with your writings. . . . I had indeed read '*St. Leon*' before I wrote *St. Irvyne*, but the reasonings had *then* made little impression."²⁰⁵ This is indicative of ambiguity on Shelley's part. On the one hand, he is emphasizing his precocity by not only writing but publishing two novels at a young age, and though saying he has outgrown this phase of his life in favor of Godwin's ideology, nevertheless encouraging Godwin to read them!

Critics such as Hughes and Peck, aware of the jumble Shelley introduced as to when he first read Godwin, have struggled to pinpoint this more accurately. They see few references to Godwin in *Zastrozzi*; "In *St. Irvyne*, however, there is no such dearth of Godwinian passages."²⁰⁶ This would seem to indicate that sometime between composing *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, Shelley read *Political Justice*, but later scholars discount the possibility that Shelley had read Godwin before writing *St. Irvyne*, and instead see *Political Justice* as forming a break with the Gothic for Shelley. Perhaps this is not only because of what

²⁰² Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 3 January 1811 [for 1812], 1:219-221.

²⁰³ Jones, ed. *Letters*, 1:227nn1-2, 228n3, 229n6.

²⁰⁴ Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 10 January 1811, 1:227.

²⁰⁵ Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 16 January 1811, 1:231.

²⁰⁶ Peck, *Life and Work*, 1:97-99.

Shelley himself said about no longer being a votary of Romance (quoted in Section 1 of this chapter), but also because Romance novels were considered low brow when compared with philosophy.²⁰⁷

Based upon these letters, Shelley is viewed as a proselyte of Godwin who abandoned trivial pursuits in favor of social reform. There can be no doubt that Shelley was influenced by Godwin's thought, and was willing to apply it in his life. The vast sums of money Shelley siphoned Godwin's way continued unabated even when the two were suffering from severely strained relations, at a time when Shelley himself was living frugally while trying to support his complex family network. Shelley, whose letters are usually signed in the polite and rather formal style of the day, frequently ends the letters to Godwin in this period of their correspondence without a closing valediction or signature, offering a painful portrait of the nature of this relationship.²⁰⁸ Yet in spite of Godwin's "desperately uneasy paterfamilias,"²⁰⁹ Shelley remains his unflinching, ever loyal pupil. To some degree, this conclusion is warranted, but not entirely.

Shelley's devotion to Godwinian philosophy needs to be reconciled with the discrepancies in the early letters. In the opening letter, for example, Shelley's praise for Godwin is profuse and hyperbolic.²¹⁰ Peck explains that "those who are familiar with Godwin's high opinion of his own high worth will be able to gauge the pleasure that [he must have enjoyed] as he read the eulogy of himself with which Shelley opened that letter."²¹¹ Yet words were Shelley's medium, and this letter is filled with flattery, not necessarily sincerity. Twice in the letter Shelley says, "I am young" while noting that Godwin is old, and he also cites his ardency twice. In the second letter, after receiving a reply from Godwin, he stresses his youthful rashness and speed: "No sooner had I formed the principles which I now profess, than I was anxious to disseminate their benefits. This was done without the slightest caution."²¹² Hazlitt has described Godwin as follows:

In fact, his *forte* is not the spontaneous, but the voluntary exercise of talent. He fixes his ambition on a high point of excellence, and spares no pains or time in attaining it. . . . He is ready only on reflection: dangerous only at the rebound. He gathers himself up, and strains every nerve and faculty with deliberate aim to some heroic and dazzling achievement of intellect: but he must make a career before he flings himself, armed, upon the enemy, or he is sure to be unhorsed.²¹³

Shelley draws attention to this polarity by contrasting his lack of deliberation with Godwin's calculating caution. Yet many of the instances which Shelley cites are difficult to verify; he was embellishing the letter to suit his own ends and to impress Godwin.

²⁰⁷ Botting, *Gothic*, 15.

²⁰⁸ Shelley to Godwin, Bishopgate, 18 January-23 June, 1816, 1:441- 477.

²⁰⁹ Nigel Leask, review of *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, by William St Clair, *Keats-Shelley Review* 5 (Autumn 1990): 88.

²¹⁰ Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 3 January 1811 [for 1812], 1:220.

²¹¹ Peck, *Life and Work*, 1:209.

²¹² Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 10 January 1812, 1:227-228.

²¹³ William Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 4, "William Godwin," Excerpted from *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825, eds. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent, 1902), 211.

Throughout, Shelley maintains his own identity, “I have but just entered on the scene of human operations, yet my feelings and my reasonings correspond with what yours were.” Note how Shelley says, “my feelings and my reasonings correspond with what yours were”, not with what they ‘are’, indicating that he recognizes Godwin’s tergiversation, as he had Southey’s and Wordsworth’s. In addition, although praising Godwin, Shelley speaks of “my principles” and “my wishes” for human improvement, he doesn’t attribute his social consciousness to Godwin as critics have done.²¹⁴ Even though Shelley admired *Political Justice*, three editions of it were released, with the third one (1798), containing the “notorious recantation”²¹⁵ in which Godwin actually defends the aristocracy:

There is a doctrine, . . . teaching ‘that the conduct of human beings in many important particulars is not determined upon any grounds of reasoning and comparison, but by immediate and irresistible impression, in defiance of the conclusions and convictions of the understanding. . . .’ If true, it, . . . opposes a bar to the hopes and improvement of social institutions. . . . if reason be frequently inadequate to its task, . . . folly may be the fittest instrument to effect the purposes of wisdom, . . . In that case, the salutary prejudices and useful delusions (as they have been called) of aristocracy, . . . may at last be found the fittest instruments for guiding and alluring to his proper ends the savage, man.²¹⁶

This passage of *Political Justice* is crucial, for “unlike Hobbes, he [Shelley] sets the imagination above the reason.”²¹⁷ This can be seen in *A Defence of Poetry*, where “Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.”²¹⁸ Shelley is a brilliant thinker, but not at the expense of feeling; he repeatedly stresses his desire to move his readers rather than to touch their intellect with his poetry.

To return to the letter of January 10, 1812, next Shelley goes out of his way to carefully explain to Godwin the vastness of his fortune:

I am heir by entail to an estate of 6000£ per an.—My principles have induced me to regard the law of primogeniture an evil of primary magnitude. My father’s notions of family honor are incoincident with my knowledge of public good. I will never sacrifice the latter to any consideration.²¹⁹

Is it not possible that Shelley was in some sense tempting, even baiting Godwin by being so direct about financial matters in only his second letter? Was Shelley indicating that he wanted to use his fortune on Godwin’s behalf in the hopes of creating a more radical reality? Or is he attempting to expose Godwin’s hypocrisy? Surely Shelley’s offer of financial support was sincere and can be verified by his dedicated efforts to fund Godwin at his own expense at high interest. Godwin was very willing to enter into this bargain. Shelley seems to have offered his services with his eyes wide open about Godwin, aware of his

²¹⁴ Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 3 January 1811 [for 1812], 1:220.

²¹⁵ Leask, review of *Godwins and Shelleys*, 78.

²¹⁶ *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp, vol. 4, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, Variants*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), 28-29 (1798).

²¹⁷ R. L. Brett, *Fancy and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1969), 63.

²¹⁸ *Shelley’s Literary and Philosophical Criticism*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: OUP, 1909), 120.

²¹⁹ Shelley to Godwin, Keswick, 10 January 1812, 1:228.

impecuniousness. Is Shelley attempting to expose the weaknesses inherent in the paternalistic society via this relationship, using himself as a sacrifice, by showing how a once virtuous man, Godwin, could be corrupted? It is a stultifying situation to come to grips with.

Moreover, there is a sentence in this letter which is arresting: "Conceive the effect which the Political Justice would have upon a mind before jealous of its independence, and participating somewhat singularly in a peculiar susceptibility."²²⁰ This sounds very much like a true statement and one which Shelley never relinquished. Therefore, it is difficult to take these letters at face value, for although Shelley was an idealistic adolescent, he was not naïve. In Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, the character based on Shelley, Scythrop, is calculating, like a fox.²²¹ Shelley is carefully setting the stage for this relationship; Godwin is the object of Shelley's affection, but Shelley is the engineer. In some sense, they are entering into a marriage based on financial exploitation, as becomes clear when the relationship deteriorates.²²² Although Shelley breaks down in a vitriolic attack in a letter to Godwin dated March 6, 1816, in the following paragraph he immediately states, "I will do all that I can not to disappoint you."²²³ Clearly this is a complex and puzzling relationship, far from the simple one-sided affair that has generally been presented.

As was noted earlier, Shelley distinguished himself from the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft. In Shelley's two opening letters to Godwin, he made conflicting statements about when he discovered Godwin's writing, but scholars are in general agreement with Jones that "Shelley may have seen and even have read *Political Justice* while he was at Eton, but it is quite certain that references to Godwin become significant only after 19 Nov. 1810, on which date he ordered a copy of the book from Stockdale."²²⁴ Yet note Godwin's stance on fainting, sleep and disease:

Fainting is nothing else but a confusion of mind, in which the ideas appear to mix in painful disorder, and nothing is distinguished. . . . Sleep is one of the most conspicuous infirmities of the human frame. It is not, as has often been supposed, a suspension of thought, but an irregular and distempered state of the faculty.²²⁵

Here is a slightly revised version of these ideas:

Nothing seems to contribute more powerfully to disease, than a confused, uncertain and bewildered mind.

Disease seems perhaps in all instances to be the concomitant of confusion. When reason resigns the helm, and our ideas fluctuate without order or direction, we sleep. Delirium and insanity are of the same nature. . . . He that continues to act, or

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, eds. H. F. B. Brett-Smith & C. E. Jones, vol. 3 (London: Constable, 1924-1934; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1967).

²²² Shelley to Godwin, Bishopgate, 18 January-23 June, 1816, 1:441-477.

²²³ Shelley to Godwin, 13, Norfolk Street, 6 March 1816, 1:459.

²²⁴ Jones, ed., *Letters*, 1:227n2.

²²⁵ *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp, vol. 3, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), 461-463 (1793).

is led to a renewal of action with perspicuity and decision, is almost inevitably a man in health.²²⁶

Shelley addresses this very clearly in the opening pages of *Zastrozzi*. There is an element of sarcasm contained in Verezzi's fainting, excessive sleep and frequent debilitating illness when seen in light of these passages of Godwin's. Shelley was daring in sending such an obvious parody directly to Godwin since it seems doubtful Godwin would have appreciated the humor. It appears Shelley thought Godwin was a little pompous and self absorbed, or as Hazlitt would say, "he blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation."²²⁷ Nevertheless, Shelley took on board the ideas of Godwin's that he admired, and applied them in his life to an unprecedented degree, while he not only ignored other Godwinian ideas, he actually lampooned them in his works. When one reads the novels in light of Godwin and the Marquis de Sade, one can see numerous references to virtue battling with vice, and reason crossing swords with passion. For example, when Verezzi stands up to Zastrozzi, resisting his "vain threats and empty denunciations of vengeance", Zastrozzi trembles, "But again revenge drowned the voice of virtue—again passion obscured the light of reason, and his steeled soul persisted in its scheme" (p 12-13). Shelley thought for himself, and encouraged others to do so too, and in the final analysis, that is what this doctoral thesis is all about.

²²⁶ Godwin, *Writings*, 4:345 (1798).

²²⁷ Hazlitt, *Works*, 4:200.

Plates



Plate 1. An Engraving for *Night Thoughts* by William Blake, 1797. (Commissioned by London publisher Richard Edwards in 1795.)



Plate 3. *Flora*, 1515. Artist: Tiziano Vecellio called Titian. Present Location: Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.



Plate 4. *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Artist: Tiziano Vecellio called Titian. Present Location: Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy.

Lyric Interlude I

Thanks to the new Longman and Johns Hopkins volumes of Shelley's poetry, many poems which were heretofore unavailable to the general public are now accessible. Taking advantage of this wonderful gift, two obscure poems from Shelley's youth will be studied, both from *The Esdaile Notebook*.

'A Translation of *The Marseillaise Hymn*'

This translation was completed in approximately 1810 or 1811, making it of the same general timeframe as the novels. According to Matthews and Everest, this is Shelley's only translation from French, and he "tried to widen its nationalism with a more universal revolutionary appeal. Thus, 'contre nous' (3) is rendered 'Against thy rights'; 'nos fiers guerriers' (26) becomes 'the arm upraised for Liberty'; and 'La France' (38) becomes 'Our Mother Earth'."²²⁸ Tolstoy would agree with Shelley's approach, for he feels that singing patriotic songs (even ones such as *The Marseillaise*, which do not glorify but curse "all tsars and kings and [invoke] destruction upon them") is harmful because it supports a "government's ambitious and mercenary aims" resulting in "a renunciation of human dignity, common sense, and conscience by the governed, and a slavish submission to those who hold power". For Tolstoy, "Patriotism is slavery" and the antidote is "in the action of the mind and in its clear expression", something Shelley dedicated his life to.²²⁹

The poem is significant for the opening stanza presages *Laon and Cythna*:

Haste to battle, Patriot Band,
 A day of Glory dawns on thee!
 Against thy rights is raised an hand –
 The blood-red hand of tyranny!
 See! The ferocious slaves of power
 Across the wasted country scour
 And in thy very arms destroy
 The pledges of thy nuptial joy,
 Thine unresisting family. (ll 1-9)

'Slaves of power' are destroying 'nuptial joy', again uniting revolution with the wedding night, or a union of lovers. In stanza two, Shelley asks "For whom is forged this hateful chain, / For whom prepared this slavery? / For you" (ll 16-18). (One is reminded of Hemingway's novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, inspired by John Donne's famous meditation, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.")²³⁰ This demonstrates Shelley's stance, which would be expressed in 'The Mask of Anarchy' and 'Song: To the Men of England,' that people by their own actions and compliance help to bind themselves in the chains which others put on them. For example, in 'To the Men of England' are the stanzas:

²²⁸ Longman1:158-160.

²²⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: OUP, 1936), 468, 517, 532.

²³⁰ John Donne, "Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation 17," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams, vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2000), 1277-1278.

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells –
 In halls ye deck another dwells.
 Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
 The steel ye tempered glance on ye.
 With plough and spade and hoe and loom
 Trace your grave and build your tomb,
 And weave your winding-sheet – till fair
 England be your Sepulchre. (ll 25-32)²³¹

This is a sentiment Tolstoy would reiterate concerning British India:

The oppression of a majority by a minority, and the demoralization inevitably resulting from it, is a phenomenon that has always occupied me and has done so most particularly of late. . . . The reason for the astonishing fact that a majority of working people submit to a handful of idlers who control their labour and their very lives is always and everywhere the same – whether the oppressors and oppressed are of one race or whether, as in India and elsewhere, the oppressors are of a different nation.²³²

The imagery of chains and slavery is familiar to the Gothic, and ties expressly back to Verezzi from *Zastrozzi* and to Laon of *The Revolt of Islam* or *Laon and Cythna*, as well as to several of Robert Burns' poems. A particularly beautiful one is 'The Slave's Lament', which deals with the feelings of a slave captured in "sweet Senegal" (l 1), who was "Torn from that lovely shore, and must never see it more" (l 3 & 5), where "streams for ever flow" and "flowers for ever blow" (l 9 & 11). It ends with the lament, "And I think on friends most dear, with the bitter, bitter tear, / And alas! I am weary, weary O" (ll 15-16 & repeated as a refrain in 17-18).²³³ A more famous poem of Burns' sums up the situation concerning outward manifestations, rather than inner feelings:

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
 Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
 Welcome to your gory bed,
 Or to Victorie!

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
 See the front o' battle lour;
 See approach proud EDWARD'S power—
 Chains and slaverie!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
 Wha can fill a coward's grave?
 Wha sae base as be a slave?
 Let him turn and flee! (p 395, ll 1-12)

²³¹ Longman3:277-280.

²³² Leo Tolstoy, "A Letter to a Hindu", Part I, (1909; Project Gutenberg, Ebook #7176, 2004), 4, <http://www.gutenberg.org/file/7176/7176-h/7176-h.htm> (accessed 20 August 2012).

²³³ Robert Burns's *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1958), 366.

In stanza three, Shelley criticizes “hired soldiers” (l 25), something which Saint Juste was against too, although he became bloodthirsty as the French Revolution wore on, and was finally executed himself. In stanza four, it is the kings who have created a “parricidal plan” which “At length shall meet its destiny” (ll 34-5). As usual, this seems to be turning things on their head, for parricide is the killing of a father or mother by a child, or the killing of a head of state or of the church. In this case, the kings themselves are committing parricide, not by murdering another head of state in war, but by the vast numbers of deaths which are suffered by their own people in their quest for power; their killing of the fathers of the nation. Burns also offers a sardonic commentary on this, entitled, ‘Thanksgiving for a National Victory’:

Ye hypocrites! are these your pranks?
 To murder men and give God thanks!
 Desist, for shame!—proceed no further;
 God won’t accept your thanks for MURDER! (p 540)

Graphic cannibalistic imagery appears in Shelley’s translation of the French national anthem (as it does in *Laon and Cythna*), with lines from the fifth stanza, “Chase those unnatural fiends away / Who on their mother’s vitals prey / With more than tiger cruelty” (ll 47-49). This shows Shelley’s use of cannibalism as a metaphor very early in his career. Stanza six is a passionate calling to Liberty, “thou more dear than meaner gold” (l 52) and her victory over tyranny. It is a translation which is in keeping with the themes of the Gothic and of Shelley’s vision, and again, of Burns’ ‘Scots, wha hae’, though Shelley would make this one encompass not only Scotland but Mother Earth, and not only Scots, but all man and womankind:

Wha, for Scotland’s King and Law,
 Freedom’s sword will strongly draw,
 Free-man stand, or Free-man fa’,
 Let him on wi’ me!

By Oppression’s woes and pains!
 By your sons in servile chains!
 We will drain our dearest veins,
 But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!
 Tyrants fall in every foe!
 Liberty’s in every blow!—
 Let us do or die! (ll 13-24)

‘Dares the Llama’

This poem is quite Gothic in nature, also dated to 1810 or 1811.²³⁴ In the opening stanza, the llama, “most fleet of the sons of wind” (l 1) cannot overcome its predators, the lion or tiger, by placing “trust in his footsteps of air” (l 4). Instead, it “sinks in helpless despair” (l 5), abandoned by its own fleet-footedness, for the “monster transfixes his prey” (l 6). Like the Medusa, the vision of the lion or tiger is able to freeze its prey in motion, indicating that it has power emanating from its eyes. It is possible that fear has frozen the llama in its tracks, fear generated by the pursuit of the lion or tiger, rendering the llama powerless and unable to use its own natural gifts. The death of the llama is graphically presented:

On the sand flows its life-blood away,
And the rocks and the woods to the death-yells reply,
Protracting the horrible harmony. (ll 7-9)

In the second stanza, the “fowl of the desert”, identified as the peafowl of India, famous for its courage, does not succumb to fear, nor does it run.²³⁵ “Yet the fowl of the desert when danger encroaches / Dares dreadless to perish, defending her brood” (ll 10-11). She is able to hold her ground, but dies in the attempt. Yet Shelley is more sympathetic to her attackers than he is to the types of destruction he described in *The Marseillaise Hymn*:

Though the fiercest of cloud-piercing tyrants approaches
Thirsting – aye, thirsting for blood,
And demands, like mankind, his brother for food;
Yet more lenient, more gentle than they,
For hunger, not glory, the prey
Must perish – (ll 12-17)

Although predatory acts form a gruesome aspect of nature, they are not as gory as the acts committed by human beings, for the animals are killing for food, to sustain themselves. For them, “revenge does not howl o’er the dead, / Nor ambition with fame bind the murderer’s head” (ll 17-18), as it does for kings and others. Revenge, cannibalism, glory, ambition, fame and murder all appear in this brief stanza, forming a steadfast link to the novels and later works.

In the third stanza, the poem is personalized with Shelley, the poet, pledging to resist the pull of the natural kingdom by seeking inspiration in the highest possible realm, no matter what dangers await him. He recognizes his imperfections, admitting that he is weak, like the llama, and is not blessed with speed (though some would dispute that), but like the “fowl of the desert”, he will fight this battle:

Though weak as the llama that bounds on the mountains
And endued not with fast-fleeting footsteps of air
Yet, yet will I draw from the purest of fountains,
Though a fiercer than tigers is there, (ll 19-22)

²³⁴ Longman1:160-162.

²³⁵ Ibid., 161n10 [fowl of the desert].

This pledge moves the poem out into a broader spectrum, exactly as Shelley did with *La Marseillaise*. The final lines of the stanza are on a political, rather than a personal scale, encompassing nations:

Though more frightful than death it scatters despair,
And its shadow eclipsing the day
Spreads the darkness of deepest dismay
O'er the withered and withering nations around,
And the war-mangled corpses that rot on the ground. (ll 23-27)

The dangers he must face are identified as “more frightful than death”, including despair, darkness in broad daylight (as will be seen in *Laon and Cythna*), and the deepest dismay. Nations are both “withered and withering”, reminiscent of the plague, famine, fires and other types of destruction that abound in *Laon and Cythna*. This is a chilling stanza which provides insight into the origin of his longest poem.

The final stanza is a paragon of Shelleian imagery. Although mixed metaphors are normally regarded as a stylistic defect, that is not the case with this poem. These metaphors reinforce so many themes which would be important to him always, including pursuit of the highest good, losing friends and loved ones as a result, the problem with faith as a means of controlling the masses, the destructive nature of love, cursing in frustration and also with a touch of humor, and dying, perhaps as a symbolic act of rebellion via suicide. Shelley is no longer alone, for others are introduced who also come to the fountain, but they encounter no better fate:

They came to the fountain to draw from its stream
Waves too poisonously lovely for mortals to see;
They basked for awhile in the love-darting beam,
Then perished – and perished like me. (ll 28-31)

These waves, which are “too poisonously lovely for mortals to see”, remind one of the mists he uses in *Zastrozzi*, ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, *Alastor*, and ‘Orpheus’ (to be explored in more detail in the third lyric interlude). The idea of extremely potent invisible waves, which are at the stream but are also in the air, forms a brilliant image which Shelley develops in ‘The Sensitive Plant’ and elsewhere.²³⁶ The “love-darting beam” captures the essence of a quality which Shelley associates with love; it is not possible to endure it directly for very long, and death or annihilation is usually the result. This concept is also used to express hatred, for *Zastrozzi* is described with a “fire-darting eye” (p 35), and at times it encompasses both emotions. For example, in *Zastrozzi*, “an ardent and voluptuous fire darted from her [Matilda’s] eyes” (p 60), intertwining love and hate.

Shelley then changes tone, blaming the situation on religion:

For in vain from the grasp of Religion I flee;
The most tenderly loved of my soul
Are slaves to its chilling control . . . (ll 32-34)

²³⁶ This image is particularly powerful for one who has endured a nuclear disaster, and has seen the invisible pollution in the water and in the air. See also Desmond King-Hele, “Shelley and Nuclear Disarmament Demonstrations,” *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* XVI (1965): 39-42.

His frustration is apparent. The poem ends on a dramatic note, which prefigures *The Cenci*:

It pursues me, it blasts me. Oh! Where shall I fly,
What remains but to curse it, to curse it and die? (ll 35-6)

It can be seen from these two brief analyses that Shelley had formed a strong sense of his goals and of his artistic vision by this time. Imagery in these poems recurs with persistency in his later works, and there is a brazen speediness, a sense of urgency bordering on frenzy that appears and that remains with him. He seems to be acutely aware that his time is limited, and that he has to aim for that highest fountain with full gusto, come what may, and that, like the Indian peafowl, he is willing to do so, holding his ground in the face of firm opposition from all adversaries. He also seems cognizant of the price, and willing to pay it. Fanny Imlay was keen not only to admire verses but also action, for she told Mary, where “I love the poet I should like to respect the man.”²³⁷ These poems confirm that both Shelley’s writing and his life were his message.



Coming Down from Mont Blanc by John Singer Sargent
Private Collection, 1911

²³⁷ Fanny Imlay to Mary Godwin, 41 Skinner Street, 29 July & 1 August 1816, in *The Clairmont Correspondence, Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin*, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking, 2 vols. (Baltimore: JHUP, 1995), 1:56.

Chapter 2 – *Laon and Cythna*

This chapter relates to the previous chapter by examining the novels in relation to the poem, and by discussing the relevant connections which occur. Difficulties encountered in the poetics, letters and related criticism are of a sensitive nature in this chapter. It must be stressed that the goal is not to toss animadversions upon the members discussed, but to better understand them and their situation. This must be done so that the novels can be viewed free from erroneous preconceptions with respect to the poem.

Laon and Cythna was not published in its original form due to the controversial essence of the content, which was deemed dangerous enough to cause a reprisal. Although unhappy at needing to change his poem, Shelley was keen enough for it to appear in some form that he submitted to the required changes. Most of the alterations removed “matter considered likely to outrage religious sensibilities and constitute grounds for prosecution”²³⁸ which Shelley consented to “against his will and as a last resort.”²³⁹ In fact, the changes seem to have been done by Charles Ollier, the publisher, and Thomas Love Peacock rather than Shelley himself:

Mr. Ollier positively refused to publish the poem as it was, and Shelley had no hope of another publisher. He for a long time refused to alter a line: but his friends finally prevailed on him to submit. Still he could not, or would not, sit down by himself to alter it, and the whole of the alterations were actually made in successive sittings of what I may call a literary committee. He contested the proposed alterations step by step: in the end, sometimes adopting, more frequently modifying, never originating, and always insisting that his poem was spoiled.²⁴⁰

The poem was revised in this way in December 1817, and published as *The Revolt of Islam* in January 1818, though some copies of *Laon and Cythna* had been printed and were circulating among Shelley’s friends, which Shelley then attempted to withdraw.²⁴¹

The full title of this poem is *Laon and Cythna; Or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of the Nineteenth Century. In the Stanza of Spenser*. This is followed by a quote in Greek of Archimedes, which translated reads, “Give me a place to stand and I will lift the world”, a quote which Shelley had already used on the title page of *Queen Mab*, reinforcing the radical nature of his agenda with this poem.²⁴² As Weisman explains, Shelley sees the poem in various ways.²⁴³ On the one hand, it is a political poem, as he told Byron, written “in the style and for the same object as ‘Queen Mab’, but interwoven with a story of human passion, and composed with more attention to the refinement and accuracy of language, and the

²³⁸ Jack Donovan, “Composition and Publication,” of *Laon and Cythna* in *The Poems of Shelley*, eds. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, vol. 2, 1817-1819 (Harlow, UK: Longman 2000), 16-17 (hereafter cited as Longman2).

²³⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁴⁰ *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, eds. H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, vol. 8 (London: Constable, 1924-1934 repr., New York: AMS Press, 1967), 141.

²⁴¹ Donovan, Longman2:15-17.

²⁴² Longman2:30-31; Longman1:269.

²⁴³ Karen A. Weisman, *Imageless Truths: Shelley’s Poetic Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 73-75.

connexion of its parts.”²⁴⁴ This makes sense, given the similar Archimedian epigraph. On the other hand, he tells Ollier that the “whole poem, with the exception of the first canto & part of the last is a mere human story without the smallest intermixture of supernatural interference.”²⁴⁵ What is particularly relevant for this study is the way in which Shelley’s letter to Lord Byron mirrors that of his earlier letters to Godwin, “I have been engaged this summer, heart and soul, in one pursuit. I have completed a poem which, when it is finished, though I do not tax your patience to read it, I will send you.”²⁴⁶ This indicates that there may be something in the poem of particular relevance to Byron.

This poem has been described as “the orphan of Shelley criticism”, a work so neglected that “entire volumes dedicated to the analysis of Shelley’s poems may do no more than allude to the fact of its existence.”²⁴⁷ Sperry explains that “Reasons for this neglect are not hard to find. The poem is sprawling and amorphous, a difficult and often confusing intermixture of epic, allegory, and romance.”²⁴⁸ This is partly because of what Hubbell identifies as its chiasitic and circular narrative structure:

If Shelley were really imitating Spenser in trying to fashion the ideal Revolutionary, his narrative would be more linear and teleological. His hero and heroine would proceed through a series of progressively more stringent, purifying trials that would lead toward a triumphant victory over virtue’s foe, as in canto I of the *Faerie Queene*. Yet the consummation scene – the victory for the hero and heroine – is in canto VI, and is followed by a flashback to Cythna’s purification experiences, not by forward progression.²⁴⁹

Other critics insist that Spenser’s romance is anything but “linear and teleological”, which would make *The Faerie Queene* an apt model for Shelley’s poem. Indeed, Virginia Woolf considered Spenser to be a feminist author, partly because of his opening stanzas to Book III, Canto ii of *The Faerie Queene*, which were offered in “praise of women and in defence of Elizabeth.”²⁵⁰ Hamilton asserts that for poets, the “presence of a woman on the throne . . . was an enormous blessing.”²⁵¹

As the Virgin Queen, . . . unconfined, then, by patriarchy – she became the Muse who inspired her poets. . . . Love became the central subject of Elizabethan poets, illustrating Socrates’ claim in the *Symposium* (196e) that Eros is so divine a poet that he can kindle creative power in others.²⁵²

²⁴⁴ Shelley to Lord Byron, 13 Lisson Grove North, 24 September 1817, 1:557.

²⁴⁵ Shelley to a publisher, 13 Lisson Grove North, 13 October 1817, 1:563.

²⁴⁶ Shelley to Lord Byron, 13 Lisson Grove North, 24 September 1817, 1:557.

²⁴⁷ Stuart M. Sperry, *Shelley’s Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1988), 210n3.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

²⁴⁹ J. Andrew Hubbell, “*Laon and Cythna*: A Vision of Regency Romanticism,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 51 (2002):178-179.

²⁵⁰ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen*, rev. 2nd ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2001, 2007), 302, 302nStanzas 1-3.

²⁵¹ A. C. Hamilton, general introduction to *Faerie Queen*, 4.

²⁵² A. C. Hamilton, “The Renaissance of the Study of the English Literary Renaissance” *English Literary Renaissance* 25 (1995): 385-386.

I

Shelley begins this poem with a preface, and as always his prefaces are worthy of note. It explains his goals for the poem, as well as what it means to be a poet, as was noted in the first chapter in relation to the poem 'To a Sky-Lark'. This preface was written prior to that poem, and addresses the matter in prose terms rather than poetically, but it reiterates (or rather 'To a Sky-Lark' does) many of the same things. For example, he states:

I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a Poem, in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality : and in the view of kindling within the bosoms of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind.

For this purpose I have chosen a story of human passion in its most universal character, diversified with moving and romantic adventures, and appealing, in contempt of all artificial opinions and institutions, to the common sympathies of every human breast. . . . I would only awaken the feelings, so that the reader should see the beauty of true virtue and be incited to those enquiries which have led to my moral and political creed, and that of some of the sublimest intellects in the world. The Poem therefore, (with the exception of the first Canto, which is purely introductory), is narrative, not didactic. . . . It is the business of the Poet to communicate to others the pleasure and the enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings, in the vivid presence of which within his own mind, consist at once his inspiration and his reward.²⁵³

In addition, he identifies qualities which prepare a person to be a poet, qualities which he himself has been blessed to receive, but then he qualifies that:

Yet the experience and the feelings to which I refer, do not in themselves constitute men Poets, but only prepares them to be the auditors of those who are. How far I shall be found to possess that more essential attribute of Poetry, the power of awakening in others sensations like those which animate my own bosom, is that which, to speak sincerely, I know not; and which with an acquiescent and contented spirit, I expect to be taught by the effect which I shall produce upon those whom I now address.²⁵⁴

Those whom he now addresses include modern readers, and therefore the critical element of the poetry seems to be the poet's capacity for awakening a feeling in the heart of his readers, whenever and wherever that may be. And finally, he states concerning the difficult yet beautiful Spenserian stanza as his

²⁵³ Longman2:32-34.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 41.

choice of measure, "But in this, as in every other respect, I have written fearlessly."²⁵⁵ That lack of fear is accompanied by speed:

The Poem now presented to the Public occupied little more than six months in the composition. That period has been devoted to the task with unremitting ardour and enthusiasm. . . . I would willingly have sent it forth to the world with that perfection which long labour and revision is said to bestow. But I found that if I should gain something in exactness by this method, I might lose much of the newness and energy of imagery and language as it flowed afresh from my mind.²⁵⁶

Already it can be seen that there is an overlap between the qualities of this poem and those of the novels, including a sincere desire to touch others and move them to some kind of change of heart which may result in action which will improve the world, and youthful enthusiasm brimming with speed and boldness unconstrained by fear. Moreover, Shelley notes his desire to challenge himself and to fully develop his powers, and he explains that his poetry is lacking in didacticism. However, many scholars, including Murphy, feel that Shelley is very didactic and has a strong moral message which he is trying to impart, so this could be another way that he is using a preface to sweeten the medicine.²⁵⁷

In the final paragraph, something happens which immediately connects this poem with the novels. Shelley describes "one circumstance which was intended to startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life."²⁵⁸ That circumstance is brother/sister incest between Laon and Cythna. In the draft in his notebooks, prior to the changes which were forced upon Shelley, there was no note, but later the following note was added: "The sentiments connected with and characteristic of this circumstance, have no personal reference to the Writer." Donovan explains that this is an afterthought intended to dispel any connection with the poet's own experience.²⁵⁹ However, the opposite may be the case. Had Shelley been allowed to publish his poem as he wanted to, it appears he would have been satisfied to leave this statement unsaid. Yet putting in the note draws attention to the matter, and immediately the reader begins to wonder, 'Why did he say that?' 'Could there be a connection here?' And then as one reads the poem, one stops to see if any connection can be made to the author's own life or circumstances. It goes without saying that Byron and the Shelley circle were engaged in risqué behavior so the reader need not look far, but Shelley clearly wanted that door opened. This may be the result of the changes he was forced to make to accommodate the repressive political climate. Shelley had begged Ollier not to give in:

I don't believe that if the book was quietly and regularly published the Government would touch anything of a character so refined and so remote from the conceptions of the vulgar. They would hesitate before they invaded a member of the higher circles of the republic of letters. But if they see us tremble, they will make no distinctions; they will feel their strength. You might bring the arm of the law down on us both by flinching now. Directly these scoundrels see that people are afraid of them, they seize

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 45-46.

²⁵⁷ *Angel*, 111n14. On the other hand, O'Neill finds the poetry to be "the reverse of didactic or propagandist" in *Imaginings*, 8.

²⁵⁸ Longman2:47.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

upon them and hold them up to mankind as criminals already convicted by their own fears. You lay yourself prostrate and they trample on you.²⁶⁰

But Ollier could not or would not hold out, and so the changes were made as explained above. Sedgwick has indicated that incest is a common theme in Gothic novels, and there is also the element of a surprise of identity. This is so in Horace Walpole's play, *The Mysterious Mother*, where the son unwittingly sleeps with his own mother (a rare case of mother/son incest) and it also happens in *Zastrozzi*, where at the end of the novel we learn that the persecutor and persecuted, Zastrozzi and Verezzi, are step-brothers. (Zastrozzi was illegitimate.) It is important to mention at this point that Shelley had an illegitimate older brother, fathered by Sir Timothy, who was a sea captain, and this may have influenced his interest in the issues of legitimacy, paternity, and inheritance.²⁶¹



The Long Leg by Edward Hopper
Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California, USA c 1930

²⁶⁰ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Marlow, 11 December 1817, 1:579.

²⁶¹ James Bieri, "Shelley's Older Brother," *Keats-Shelley Journal* XXXIX (1990): 29-33.

II

Finch finds that Shelley's love for Mary, including his awareness of "the power and value of love, and of the sexuality which so intensely expresses it", forms the backbone of *Laon and Cythna*. He notes that "in the transgressive love of Laon and Cythna can be seen a testimony to the same intense and fulfilling passion which Shelley found with Mary."²⁶² Yet, in light of Shelley's drawing attention to the incest theme, this needs to be explored carefully. First of all, there is the dedication to Mary, whom Shelley had wed one year previously on December 30, 1816, at her and Godwin's insistence; he himself had wanted to wait out of respect for Harriet and his children by Harriet, Ianthe and Charles. In the dedication, Mary is mentioned as a "Sweet Friend" (l 122), a "Child of love and light" (l 9), "Thou Friend" (l 55) and a "dear Friend" (l 19).²⁶³ The term 'friend' is a wonderful one as used by Shelley and is not to be taken negatively, but even so, it is noteworthy that that term is repeated so much. He mentions her "glorious parents" (l 101) and the fact that she "canst claim / The shelter, from thy Sire, of an immortal name" (ll 107-108). But there is an irony in this, because Godwin abandoned his two young teenage daughters, Mary and Claire Clairmont, after they ran off with Shelley, and he would not allow them to return home, something which truly surprised Mary. So in fact, "the shelter" of his name is a double entendre because Godwin withdrew all fatherly support from her and Claire when they acted upon the teachings which he himself espoused in his political writings. They were then thrown completely on the mercy of a young man with a baby and a pregnant wife who was himself in financial straits, and this may indeed have had an impact on the way the situation unfolded.

This reinforces issues with Godwin discussed in the previous chapter. Shelley confuted William Wordsworth and Robert Southey for their tergiversation, but remained conspicuously silent on the public level when it came to Godwin. In 'Ozymandias', a "traveller from an antique land" (l 1) reports on the state of a King's achievements. This king's "frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things" (ll 4-7).²⁶⁴ The traveler continues, "'Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away'. –" (ll 12-14). This indicates that for Shelley, the representation of human passions outlives many things and perhaps lasts into eternity. This representation encompasses not only the decayed sculpture but also Shelley's poem about it; a poem which infuses new life into the sculptor's piece. Keats did the same thing with his sonnet 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles'.²⁶⁵ Thus, although Shelley spared Godwin by not concretizing his feelings publicly concerning Godwin's tendency to tergiversate, one possibility which is emerging is that Shelley breathed new energy into *Political Justice* by using his very life as an example of Godwinian teachings, and doing so right within Godwin's circle. In that sense, Shelley did not need to say anything because his actions, in contrast with Godwin's reaction to them, communicated far more than words ever could.

²⁶² Peter Finch, "Shelley's *Laon and Cythna*: The Bride Stripped Bare . . . Almost" *Keats-Shelley Review* 3 (Autumn 1988): 24.

²⁶³ *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (Published for The Julian Editions. London: Ernest Benn and New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 1:237-410.

²⁶⁴ Longman2:307-311.

²⁶⁵ John Keats, *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (London: OUP, 1901, 1951), 270.

To return to the dedication, having survived hardships with Mary, “a serener hour” (l 73) has descended, and they

can look from our tranquility
Like lamps into the world’s tempestuous night, --
Two tranquil stars, while clouds are passing by
Which wrap them from the foundering seaman’s sight,
That burn from year to year with unextinguished light. (ll 122-126)

This tranquility (repeated twice) can hardly be said to equate with Shelley’s impetuosity, speed and boldness, qualities which he stressed in the preface. Cameron noticed this too, when he stated, “The Dedication to *Laon and Cythna* in the fall of 1817 indicates that, despite his frustration and loneliness, he and Mary had built up a bond of mutual affection but reveals no true passion.”²⁶⁶ Moreover, the imagery is distressing. The stars are in the sky wrapped in clouds, so those who need them, the sailors, cannot access them. Reiman and Fraistat gloss the word ‘foundering’ as “Stumbling, sinking because the ship is filled with water.”²⁶⁷ Roberts notes that “it is tough luck for the foundering seaman. The Shelleys are unable to reach out beyond their incestuous ‘partnership’ of two.”²⁶⁸ Needless to say, this is not where the incest of the poem lies, and certainly Shelley and Mary had enough on their hands without adding a chimera! Nevertheless, the fact that a respected scholar could make such a claim (even metaphorically) without blinking an eye will be addressed shortly.

Shelley mentions parentage again when speaking of his and Mary’s home and their two children by saying, “And these delights, and thou, have been to me / The parents of the Song I consecrate to thee” (ll 80-1). He is the father of the children, but the children and Mary are as parents to him. Knowing Shelley’s character, this means that he may need to rebel against them, or to phrase that more appropriately, to break the traditional bonds which tie human beings together. Issues of parentage, inheritance, identity, legitimacy and family were deeply problematic for Shelley. He was constantly fighting against the accepted norms, acting and writing “in contempt of all artificial opinions and institutions” in an attempt to expand and redefine them according “to the common sympathies of every human breast”. The price was high, as Daisy Hay has pointed out.²⁶⁹ Here again, Godwin seems to be the source, for not only does he feel that marriage is “the worst of all laws”, but also “that marriage is an affair of property, and the worst of all properties,” a statement which his own relationship with Shelley, based on financial property, confirmed.²⁷⁰

One source of distress was the death of Harriet Westbrook Shelley and her family’s subsequent refusal to let Shelley have their two children. The matter went before the Chancery, and the judgment against Shelley was nearly the first time ever in English law that a member of the landed gentry was

²⁶⁶ Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1974), 304.

²⁶⁷ *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 2nd ed., eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, NCE (New York: Norton, 2002), 105n4 (hereafter cited as *P&P*).

²⁶⁸ Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 184.

²⁶⁹ Daisy Hay, *Young Romantics: The Tangled Lives of English Poetry’s Greatest Generation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 305-309.

²⁷⁰ Godwin, *Writings*, 3:453 (1793).

deprived of his children. Harriet, therefore, has been a figure either ignored or maligned in the scholarly literature, generally speaking, even though her fate was in large measure determined by the very social stigmas and rules that Shelley was fighting against. Her life was basically ruined when he left her. She had not fallen out of love with him, and did not want the marriage to break up; Shelley was the one who instigated it.²⁷¹ Cameron describes their relationship as one which “precipitated in its outcome one of the most violent controversies in English literary biography.”²⁷² Claire Tomalin treats Harriet with the utmost fairness and respect. She notes that Thomas Love Peacock, who met Shelley and Harriet in October 1812, “was so impressed by Harriet’s beauty and charm that he never lost his feeling for her and wrote her praises warmly long after her death. Certainly few brides would set themselves to learn Latin during their first pregnancy, as she did.”²⁷³

Holmes describes her as possessing “a simple moral earnestness set off by physical beauty, and the selflessness which resonated perfectly with Shelley’s current plans for disinheriting himself from his family and his class.”²⁷⁴ Peacock, who knew Harriet personally, described her as follows:

Few are now living who remember Harriet Shelley. I remember her well, and will describe her to the best of my recollection. She had a good figure, light, active and graceful. Her features were regular and well proportioned. Her hair was light brown, and dressed with taste and simplicity. In her dress she was truly *simplex munditiis*. Her complexion was beautifully transparent; the tint of the blush rose shining through the lily. The tone of her voice was pleasant; her speech the essence of frankness and cordiality; her spirits always cheerful; her laugh spontaneous, hearty, and joyous.²⁷⁵

This is the description of a young woman who is vibrant, happy, and active.

Yet the suicide, following Shelley’s foray to the continent some years before with Mary and Claire, which resulted in pregnancy and a *ménage à trois*, could also in some sense be blamed on Mary, the other woman in the picture, and even on Godwin, who would not let her come home. Many scholars are keen to downplay this negative association, and to reinforce this position they find it necessary to denigrate Harriet. For example, Hay describes Harriet as “a sweet-faced, slightly passive sixteen year old, very much under the thumb of her older sister.”²⁷⁶ This may have a ring of truth to it, but it does not quite tell the whole story, as can be seen from the accounts rendered above. Hay describes Mary, on the other hand, also at sixteen years of age, as “beautiful, and extremely intelligent.”²⁷⁷ The descriptors “sweet-faced” and “beautiful”, “passive” and “extremely intelligent” are used to present a certain image of two very pretty, very bright young sixteen year olds, both of whom fell in love with Shelley. One is presented favorably, the

²⁷¹ Kenneth Neill Cameron, ed., “The Last Days of Harriet Shelley,” in *Shelley and His Circle 1773-1822*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1970), 774, 801 (hereafter cited as *Circle*).

²⁷² *YS*, 89.

²⁷³ Claire Tomalin, *Shelley and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 34; See Louise Schutz Boas, *Harriet Shelley, Five Long Years* (London: OUP, 1962); Janet Todd, *Death and the Maidens, Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley Circle* (London: Profile Books, 2007).

²⁷⁴ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 67.

²⁷⁵ Peacock, *Works*, 8:94-95.

²⁷⁶ Hay, *Romantics*, 21.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

other less so, particularly by modern standards of what a young woman should be, that is to say, independent. Hay makes it clear that Mary is a modern woman, Harriet traditional. Moreover, Hay sees Harriet's close relationship with her sister as a dependency, rather than an asset, in an era when women had no social services to turn to. All of this is designed to present the relationship between Mary and Shelley as the correct union, especially when compared with Harriet, his first wife, or Claire Clairmont, a constant presence. And it just so happens that this is exactly what Shelley wanted.



April Love by Arthur Hughes 1855 Tate Britain

III

Many scholars have noted and commented upon the power that Mary Godwin exerted over Shelley when they first met and subsequently ran off to the continent together, including Finch, cited above, and Hay:

Writing to Thomas Hogg some months later he [Shelley] described his first feelings for her: 'how deeply did I not feel my inferiority, how willingly confess myself far surpassed in originality, in genuine elevation & magnificence of the intellectual nature until she consented to share her capabilities with me.' Shelley was humbled by Mary: he had never met anyone who matched her in looks, character or parentage, and he felt acutely aware that her intellect far surpassed his own. But he also wanted to possess her, not just because she was beautiful and clever, but because of the radical union she represented.²⁷⁸

As a scholar of the young Percy Bysshe Shelley, it is difficult to accept the premise that he felt inferior intellectually to any other human being, whomever it might have been and whenever they might have lived. Nevertheless, there it is in his own handwriting in a letter to one of his best friends. It seems Shelley did not place any credence in his gifts, and Hay has duly reported that. Moreover, the implication that Shelley wanted to possess another human being, in terms of ownership as prescribed by the extremely old-fashioned and traditional definition of marriage, at first seems to be completely foreign to his writings and his behavior. Yet upon further investigation, it becomes clear that Hay is stating the facts accurately, for not once, but twice in that letter Shelley emphasizes that he wants to "possess this inestimable treasure" (the first example) and a bit later on, "Let it suffice to you, who are my friend to know & to rejoice that she is mine: that at length I possess the inalienable treasure, that I sought & that I have found."²⁷⁹

At the time of the difficulty in Shelley's first marriage to Harriet, when Thomas Jefferson Hogg wanted to seduce Harriet, the word 'possess' was also used. In a letter from Shelley to Hogg, he writes, "Heaven knows that if the possession of Harriet's person, of the attainment of her love was all that intervened between our meeting again tomorrow, willingly would I return to York, aye willingly, to be happy thus to prove my friendship. Jealousy has no place in my bosom."²⁸⁰ In this case 'possess' seems to indicate sexual union, which may be what Shelley is referring to with Mary as well, but use of this language is provocative, resulting in an extremely troublesome situation. Hay has done her job with care, and has stated the facts. Yet this attitude expresses the utmost conservatism, and is quite out-of-step with both *Queen Mab* and the novels. One is, therefore, face-to-face with a dilemma. Is Shelley speaking the truth? Does he really want to own another human being? Is he a conservative or a radical? Most persons down through the years, including Marx and Engels, have felt that Shelley was a radical through and through. It is incongruous that when Shelley met a young woman of radical parentage he became an arch conservative in outlook.

²⁷⁸ Hay, *Romantics*, 27-28.

²⁷⁹ Shelley to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, 5 Church Terrace, 3 October 1814, 1:403.

²⁸⁰ Shelley to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Chesnut Hill, 16 November 1811, 1:184.

Therefore, it is necessary to interpret this letter with care. Certainly he wrote it, but it may not have been sincere, as has been seen so many times in other letters; that is to say, he may have had ulterior motives in doing so. This does not mean that he did not love Mary, but Hay's astute observation of "the radical union she represented" (a phrase not in the letter) offers a brilliant clue. Perhaps it was a union of pedigree, a royal relationship of radicals, so to speak, that Shelley was seeking, which must be admitted as a possibility in terms of turning marriage on its head in the height of irony. In such a case, love need not have been part of the equation, as, unlike now, in the past it was not a requirement for royal marriages. If this is so, as Hay implies, then it truly raises questions about Shelley's love for Mary. However, it seems certain he loved her, but not at the expense of free love, for she, as a child of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, was perhaps chosen to help him further his radical agenda. In any case, for a scholar of the young Shelley, this letter raises red flags and sets off numerous alarm bells.

This brings up another burdensome matter, and that is that when Mary and Harriet are compared, as they inevitably are, it reinforces limiting stereotypes, rather than helping to usher in a new and more loving era. This is a consequence which can be tied directly back to Shelley himself. It seems as though, via that letter, he was deliberately thwarting the very goals that he sought to achieve. For example, Hay states, based upon what Shelley wrote, that no one could match Mary in character, a young woman who ran off with Harriet's husband. That is fair enough, but this also implies that Harriet, herself a young wife who happened to be pregnant at the time, had a character which deserved such treatment, and this has, unfortunately, resulted in an uncomfortable prejudice against the common woman because it gives the elite, the creative ones, freedom to flaunt tradition as they choose to, but places others, such as Harriet, into the traditional box. Harriet is portrayed as not being a good enough wife to hold on to her man and therefore deserving of a painful fate, and that box is locked firmly against her with the key thrown away. It is a trend in the literature, and scholars are adept at doing this with sophistication. Finch does so when he states, "Mary – intelligent, well-educated, and herself politically radical – was, unlike Harriet, a partner whom Shelley felt to be his intellectual and emotional equal."²⁸¹ Finch seems to be basing this on what Shelley himself indicated, as verified by Thomas Love Peacock, "the explanation of [Shelley's] conduct [can be placed] on the ground on which he rested it himself—that he had found in another the intellectual qualities which constituted his ideality of the partner of his life."²⁸² Peacock also confirms:

That Shelley's second wife was intellectually better suited to him than his first, no one who knew them both will deny; and that a man, who lived so totally out of the ordinary world and in a world of ideas, needed such an ever-present sympathy more than the general run of men, must also be admitted.²⁸³

Nevertheless, there is no indication that Harriet was not bright, nor that she was poorly educated, nor that she did not do her best to support Shelley's ideals. To the contrary, as Peacock illustrates:

She was well educated. She read agreeably and intelligently. She wrote only letters, but she wrote them well. Her manners were good; and her whole aspect and demeanour such manifest emanations of pure and truthful nature, that to be once in

²⁸¹ Finch, "The Bride," 25.

²⁸² Peacock, *Works*, 8:111.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 95.

her company was to know her thoroughly. She was fond of her husband, and accommodated herself in every way to his tastes. If they mixed in society, she adorned it; if they lived in retirement, she was satisfied; if they travelled, she enjoyed the change of scene.²⁸⁴

Paul Foot notes that she had radical sympathies:

She took an alert interest in the world about her, and was outraged by what she saw.

From Dublin she wrote to Shelley's friend Elizabeth Hitchener in 1812:

'Poor Irish people how much I feel for them . . . People talk of the fiery spirit of these distressed creatures, but that spirit is very much broken and ground down by the oppressors of this poor country . . .

How often do we hear people say that poverty is no evil. I think that if they had experienced it they would soon alter their tone. To my idea it is the worst of all evils, as the miseries that flow from it are certainly very great; the many crimes we hear of daily are the consequences of poverty, and that to a very great degree . . .'

Very few fashionable young women of the time would have held such views, let alone dared to write about them. When the Luddites were hanged at York, it was Harriet, not Shelley, who wrote asking for a subscription to be raised for the hanged men's families – and sending money.²⁸⁵

Yet scholars continually judge Harriet by a different standard than they do William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron, all of whom advocated and practiced sexual freedom, some of whom became pregnant or fathered children out of wedlock. The subtle (or not so subtle) message is that Harriet's job was to be a traditional wife, a role which scholars are desperate to convince us that she failed at. Chichester notes that Shelley "seemed to underestimate his first wife's attachment to their baby daughter Ianthe, interpreting Harriet's refusal to breast-feed as a failure of love. . . . But he had no reason to doubt Mary's passionate involvement with the two children she had borne and with the baby she carried while her husband gave birth to his epic."²⁸⁶ Sperry says that "As the two dedications suggest, the first to Harriet [for *Queen Mab*], the second to Mary [for *The Revolt of Islam*], Shelley had discovered in his second wife not simply a new fund of sympathy but an active feminine intelligence equal and complementary to his own, a new range of sensibility he could draw on for the dramatic and psychological development of his work."²⁸⁷ Like Finch, he is basing this on Shelley's own words, but Sperry continues in this vein for another entire page. Critics have to spend "long tediums of strained anxiety", to quote H. G. Wells,²⁸⁸ as this vapid mentality is expressed *ad nauseum* in the literature. There is no empathy for Harriet's role as a woman of the nineteenth century, with hopes and dreams and skills and gifts, a young mother, who lost everything over the choices Shelley made and the consequences

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Foot, *Red Shelley*, 124-125.

²⁸⁶ Teddi Lynn Chichester, "Shelley's Imaginative Transsexualism in *Laon and Cythna*," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 45, (1996): 98n46.

²⁸⁷ Sperry, *Verse*, 41-42.

²⁸⁸ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, First ed., s.v. "tediums."

this placed upon her due to the paternalistic rules of society. That she ended her life in suicide at barely twenty-one years of age, leaving her two young children behind, is not enough for her to be left in peace. Shelley's hand in putting this ball in motion in 1814 notwithstanding, nothing about this current situation can be seen to be enlightened, and in fact, this theme forms the very fabric of *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*.

Tomalin sums up the situation with sensitivity:

Attempts to explain Shelley's loss of love for Harriet, his own or anyone else's, tend to absurdity, since clever men can love stupid wives, unworldly men love wives who want new hats and smart clothes, short-tempered men put up with detested in-laws. Whatever Harriet's faults or virtues, Shelley was only twenty-one; what he had loved in her he loved no longer; for him, something had to change.²⁸⁹

Whether the issue in question is one of free-love, on the one hand, or a youthful mistake, on the other, character assassination of the abandoned wife has no place in the picture:

I feel it due to the memory of Harriet to state my most decided conviction that her conduct as a wife was as pure, as true, as absolutely faultless, as that of any who for such conduct are held most in honour. . . . Harriet suffered enough in her life to deserve that her memory should be respected. I have always said to all whom it might concern, that I would defend her, to the best of my ability, against all misrepresentations.²⁹⁰

Not only have critics not responded to Peacock's words, they want the marriage between Mary and Shelley to be viewed as a traditional one, which is completely contradictory, though it does appear to be the way that Shelley wanted his marriage to Mary viewed.

However, it is necessary to take a step back and to question that. Shelley's poetics and prose writings would seem to indicate that he was not disposed to enter into a traditional relationship or marriage with anyone, let alone a fellow radical. Though a complex man who sent out mixed signals, it seems that he never gave up on the concept of free love as a tool to transform society. Although involving sexuality, it was never a sexually promiscuous concept for him, based purely on the body and the satisfaction of lust. Nora Crook and Derek Guiton have devoted a whole book to the question of whether or not Shelley had syphilis or another venereal disease, entitled *Shelley's Venomed Melody*.²⁹¹ This is unproven but possible, so the fact that his standard of free love involved the body is clear, but he was always striving for more, for the perfect union. As such, his concept of free love is an ideal difficult to realize, as can be seen from *Alastor*, other poems, and the novels too where when thwarted, death is the result. In the novels, the deaths tend to be violent ones, but that is because society has imposed strictures on love, particularly the concept of possession of another person, which warps human behavior and damages domestic relations. This makes the question of possession of another person by Shelley himself an ironic and troubling one, not to be taken at face value. Indeed, in a letter to Byron he describes his

²⁸⁹ Tomalin, *Shelley and His World*, 40.

²⁹⁰ Peacock, *Works*, 8:93, 138; See also *The Complete Works of Mark Twain: In Defense of Harriet Shelley* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), 1-59.

²⁹¹ Nora Crook and Derek Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986).

marriage to Mary as “a change (if it be a change) which had principally her feelings in respect to Godwin for its object. I need not inform you that this is simply with us a measure of convenience, and that our opinions as to the importance of this pretended sanction, and all the prejudices connected with it, remain the same.”²⁹²

To conclude, sexual double-standards existed not only between men and women, but also between classes, and the class distinctions took their toll on women more so than on men. For example, an illegitimate son, such as Shelley’s older brother, would have been far less impacted by that than an illegitimate daughter would have been. Annette Wheeler Cafarelli has astutely pointed out that women of the socially superior group, such as Lady Mount Cashell, Lady Melbourne and Countess Guiccioli, were not subjected to harmful consequences on their reputations for their sexual liaisons in the way that women of other classes were. She notes that “only when Lady Caroline Lamb exceeded the farthest bounds of public propriety was she censured.”²⁹³ What has been less well understood is that the constraints of the paternalistic society are affecting modern Romantic scholarship. For example, I found that when I verbalized my anxiety about Harriet and her treatment, a polarity emerged: if I defended Harriet, I had to be against Mary. Unfortunately, this ideology defines women in terms of competition with a man, which is very old-fashioned, and happens to be a central theme in the novels.

The new wave of feminism, sometimes called the third wave, addresses issues of shaming of women because of their real or imagined sexual behavior. Often this is done to a woman out of jealousy, competitiveness or fear, and it can be done by a man or a woman. Once a woman’s reputation has been damaged in this way, it can be extremely difficult to repair. Although Mary Shelley is the one who engaged in sexually provocative behavior for the times, Harriet, Shelley’s legitimate wife, is the one who has been shamed. This is not because of either Mary’s or Harriet’s character, but rather because of the needs of society to control sexual behavior which is deemed threatening to the order. This type of shaming has been defined as internalized sexism, and scholars do not seem to be aware that they are propagating it.²⁹⁴ This places scholars in complicity with the shaming, rendering it institutionalized; as such, internalized sexism can be extremely difficult to identify and to fight against.

Because Mary Shelley was a young woman of radical parentage, she is allowed—even expected—to be sexually free by critics while Harriet is castigated because she was a stumbling block to that freedom. This is class-based sexism. Mary Shelley is not shamed because, although not wealthy, she was of illustrious radical parentage, placing her in the category of the favored. That Godwin and Mrs. Godwin (and Mary Shelley in later years) were involved in destroying Harriet’s reputation is unfortunate, but Godwin was not only a defining figure of the age, he was also defined by it.²⁹⁵ Similarly, scholars,

²⁹² Shelley to Lord Byron, Albion House, 23 April 1817, 1:539-40.

²⁹³ Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, “The Transgressive Double Standard: Shelleyan Utopianism and Feminist Social History,” *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: JHUP, 1996), 91, 284n11, 103.

²⁹⁴ See Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, 4th ed. (New York: OUP, 2011); Jessica Valenti, *He’s a Stud, She’s a Slut: The Sexual Double Standard* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008); Leora Tanenbaum, *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999); Betty Brown, “IBARW: A primer on privilege: what it is and what it isn’t” (2007) <http://brown-betty.livejournal.com/305643.html> (accessed 9 August 2012).

²⁹⁵ Todd, *Maidens*, 244-249; Boas, *Harriet*, 150-218; Hazlitt, *Works*, 4:200-212.

even in the twenty-first century, many who consider themselves liberal, are in fact severely bound by the rules of the paternalistic society. Sir Neville Rogers provides an extreme example when he states that Harriet's suicide can in no way be attributed to Shelley, that Charles was probably not Shelley's child, and that Harriet was a prostitute.²⁹⁶ Rogers was writing in the 1960s and it is inappropriate to judge him by the standards of 2012, half a century later, but as has been demonstrated, he is by no means alone in casting aspersions upon Harriet. This kind of hostility contradicts Peacock's recollections, and cannot be ascribed to Shelley's public behavior (his letters are another matter, to be discussed later in this chapter), indicating that sex-shaming of Harriet has taken on a life of its own and has grown in stature over time, not lessened. (Cameron's discussion of Harriet's suicide, which deals with Rogers' charges, will also be discussed.)²⁹⁷

This state of affairs is unfortunate for Mary Shelley as well, because she is portrayed as being a goddess rather than a woman. She is described by Hay as the most beautiful, bright, creative and illustrious woman Shelley had ever met, but this is unfair to her.²⁹⁸ All of the women of the Shelley circle were attractive and clever, with positive qualities, each according to her own nature. It is the paternalistic society, and specifically the intelligentsia, who want Mary Shelley to be placed above all of the other women in the circle in order to make her impregnable. This is not because they value her individuality, but because they are using her to contain Shelley's radical sexual agenda. She is as much a victim in the opposite sense as Harriet is. As a goddess of unsurpassed excellence in all respects, no other woman can hold a candle to her. Mary Shelley cannot live up to that standard, nor should she be expected to. The consequence is that Mary falls short when she acts human, and none of the others are appropriately valued or respected: Harriet has been humiliated unfairly and this continues, Claire is de-sexed, while Shelley is viewed as undersexed in relation to her, and Fanny Imlay, another important female voice, remains a shadow in spite of Todd's recent monograph.²⁹⁹ This explains Roberts' claim that the Shelleys were involved in an "incestuous 'partnership' of two". Though not incestuous, it was designed by Shelley and Mary to look exclusive (even though it wasn't) so that attacks by society would be lessened to some degree. This may not have worked at the time, but it has worked in retrospect. This thesis seeks to challenge that assumption and to incorporate diversity into the Shelley circle by welcoming all of the women in and allowing them to be seen as the individuals that they were. It also means that Shelley's identity needs to be separated from both Godwin and Mary Shelley. (See Figures 1, 2 & 3.)

²⁹⁶ Neville Rogers, "Justice and Harriet Shelley," *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* XV (1964): 13-20.

²⁹⁷ *Circle*, 4:769-802.

²⁹⁸ Hay, *Romantics*, 27-28, 116.

²⁹⁹ See also Todd, *Maidens*; Boas, *Harriet*.

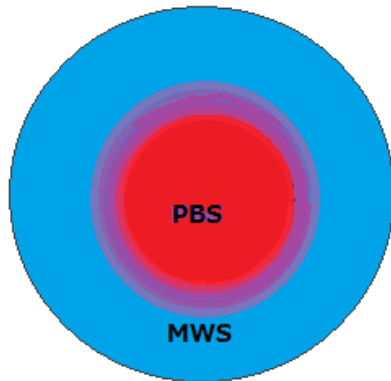


Figure 1
The Current State of Affairs

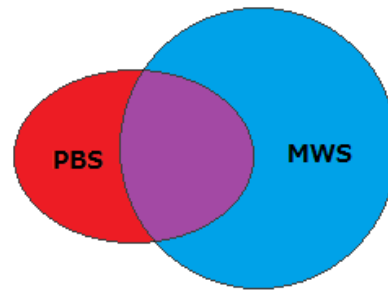


Figure 2
A Better State of Affairs

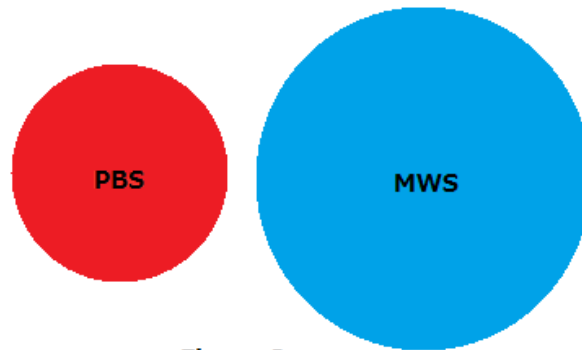


Figure 3
The Best State of Affairs

Shelley is the original source of the problem because of what would be defined today as his 'sex positive' approach in a world where no one, especially the women and children, though the men suffered too, could escape the consequences. Loosely defined, 'sex positive' can be seen as an attitude which is supportive of safe, consensual and guilt-free sexual conduct. The terms 'sex negative' and 'sex positive' were coined in the twentieth century:

This polarity owes its inception to Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), who sought to synthesize Freud and Marx in a style acceptable to the leftist intelligentsia in Central Europe of the 1920s. The basic hypothesis is that some societies accept the inherent value of sexual expression and indeed insist on it as a prerequisite of mental health, while other human groups despise sexuality and are ceaselessly inventive in devising austerities and prohibitions as a means of social control. . . .

In truth, all cultures regulate sexual behavior in one way or another. No human society allows its members, whatever their age, sex, or social status, to interact sexually with one another without restriction.³⁰⁰

In spite of his feminism, there is little to be proud of in Shelley's conduct concerning Harriet after he ran off with Mary. After her suicide, however, although he does express some vicious emotions, there are two important ways that he behaved more nobly, both of which have been undervalued. The first is that in a letter to her sister, Eliza, he stated that she might understandably harbor ill feelings toward "the lady [Mary] whose union with me you may excusably regard as the cause of your sister's ruin."³⁰¹ Twice elsewhere in the letter he makes it clear that he holds no malice toward either Harriet's parents, the Westbrooks, nor toward Eliza herself, though they are the ones who may have reasonably blamed him for the situation, so it was perhaps a pre-emptive and diplomatic strategy on his part.

This letter is particularly interesting for my hypothesis, because although two children were involved, Shelley names only Ianthe, not once does he name Charles. He uses the singular, 'child', as well as the plural 'children'; he also switches pronouns moving between 'she' and 'they', but the entire tone of the letter is addressed towards Ianthe. It adds to the issues Shelley had with paternity and inheritance, and one could possibly conclude that he would have allowed the Westbrooks to keep baby Charles, and raise him as they wanted, knowing that as the first-born son he would one day inherit Shelley's fortune, if Shelley were allowed to raise Ianthe. After the situation went to Chancery there was no way to achieve an amicable agreement of that type. The letter does indicate, however, that Shelley thought the revolution had to begin with daughters.

The second way in which Shelley acted respectfully toward Harriet is that at the trial with his children at stake he never raised the issue of Harriet's fidelity or lack thereof in his defense:

There was nothing detrimental to Harriet's 'honour' mentioned at any stage of the hearings. It was Shelley who was under fire. . . . The charges against Harriet's probity did not stem from Shelley; if he could have substantiated them he could have made use of them to bolster his case; they were pressed upon him by Godwin

³⁰⁰ Warren Johansson, "Sex Negative, Sex Positive," in *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes, 2 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 2:1182.

³⁰¹ Shelley to Eliza Westbrook, London, 18 December 1816, 1:522-524, 523-524nn1-2.

who was desperately anxious to cover up the fact that Mary had been living in adultery. He industriously spread tales of Harriet's misbehavior as a smoke screen. Claire Clairmont years later supported Godwin's unfounded slander that Harriet had been unfaithful to her husband *four months before* his elopement with Mary.³⁰²

This indicates how severe the process of shaming was, by both men and women, upon Harriet in order to protect Mary from the ravages of a damaged reputation. (Again, this matter is relevant to Harriet's suicide, which will be dealt with in detail later.) Todd offers her perspective of the situation:

[It appears] that Shelley did not declare to his lawyer that Harriet had not been made pregnant by him. This was curious if he had any doubts, since, although the unborn child was not an issue in the case, Shelley needed to denigrate Harriet—and consequently his opponents the Westbrooks—as thoroughly as he could. A child conceived out of wedlock—even if their marriage existed only on paper and Shelley had deserted her—could still be used to impugn his wife's morals.³⁰³

Sadly, this analysis by Todd completely misses the point. First of all, there is no proof of the pregnancy, (as I see it; this will be dealt with in conjunction with the suicide) and Shelley's legal stance supports that, so she is continuing the shaming by asserting it as though it were a fact; and secondly, Shelley wanted his children, but not at the expense of Harriet's honor. Why would his standard of free love be denied to her? Why would it have been acceptable for him, a married man, to participate in sexual behavior that was refused to her? Society had a double standard, but he did not. Shelley was acting on his principles, not trying to get his children at any cost.

Harriet is the one ultimately responsible for her suicide, but societal factors pushed her to that decision, as did Shelley. Her love for him seems never to have waned or wavered; and although her suicide note was addressed to her sister, Eliza, about half way through she begins to speak directly to Shelley too. She is also concerned with the custody of the children, though she seeks the opposite solution from Shelley, perhaps because his radical approach to women brought only heartache to her young life:

. . . I have not written to Bysshe—oh no, what would it avail? my wishes or my prayers would not be attended to by him & yet should he see this perhaps he might grant my last request to let Ianthe remain with you [Eliza] always; dear lovely child, with you she will enjoy much happiness, with him none. My dear Bysshe, let me conjure you by the remembrance of our days of happiness, to grant my last wish; do not take your innocent child from Eliza who has been more than I have, who has watched over her with such unceasing care. Do not refuse my last request, I never could refuse you & if you had never left me I might have lived but as it is I freely forgive you & may you enjoy that happiness which you have deprived me of.

There's your beautiful boy. Oh! Be careful of him & his love may prove one day a rich reward. As you form his infant mind so you will reap the fruits hereafter. Now comes the sad task of saying farewell—oh! I must be quick. God keep & watch over you all—you, dear Bysshe, and you, dear Eliza. May all happiness attend ye

³⁰² Boas, *Harriet*, 209-210.

³⁰³ Todd, *Maidens*, 178, 29.

both is the last wish of her who loved ye more than all others. My children—I dare not trust myself there. They are too young to regret me & ye will be kind to them for their own sakes more than for mine. My parents, do not regret me; I was unworthy your love & care. Be happy, all of you. So shall my spirit find rest & forgiveness. God bless you all is the last prayer of the unfortunate

Harriet S³⁰⁴

This is not the letter of a woman who has been disloyal to her husband, nor does it seem she is pregnant and that that is burdening her mind, far from it. Peacock seems perfectly vindicated in his statements about her character. The powerful stance which Shelley took to fight the consequences of the paternalistic society, by leaving Harriet's honor intact and untouched in court, cannot be underestimated. He never once verbally denigrated her in public. He has done far more with that one action than critics have been able to grasp, because they remain, as Godwin was, blinded by internalized sexism.

Therefore, although Finch identifies Mary Shelley as the impetus behind *Laon and Cythna*, it is necessary to look at the preface and the language of the poetry for confirmation, and the dedication is one piece of the puzzle. It can be seen that this dedication is placid, formulaic, occasionally negative, and is operating on more than one level at once. One must interpret the data with care. Shelley is always clever and is hard to pin down in any one specific spot. As Colwell has wisely noted when studying *Alastor*:

Contemporary criticism has alerted us to the perils of confusing the singer with his song, and Ariadne's thread, the simple narrative skein that served to direct us to and from our encounters with mystery, crisis, and recognition, has become treacherously snarled. . . . Failure to disengage *Alastor's* teller from his tale and to dissociate each from the author's preface invites charges of critical naïveté, while to do so involves treading a slippery trail of red herrings. Perhaps the discomfort occasioned by Shelley's often frenetic impulsiveness, his intensity and candour, continues to haunt the squeamish modern reader, who would render him more tolerable through the removes afforded by ironic structures. But it is Shelley's habit to mince his readers rather than words.³⁰⁵

This advice can be useful when approaching *Laon and Cythna* as well, for the character of Laon is very Shelleian. Colwell notes concerning *Alastor* that the "distinction between the narrator and his hero has been drawn with such ingenuity that it has become necessary to reaffirm what was once obvious, that the narrator spins a tale about someone remarkably like himself in character, temper and background."³⁰⁶ *Alastor* also has a preface, which Colwell finds troubling at times, when compared with the way the poem itself unfolds, for he notes that it "introduces a homiletic tone which the narrative mercifully evades. *Alastor* probably touched upon a personal nerve which compelled Shelley, as in *Epipsychidion*, to hide

³⁰⁴ Boas, *Harriet*, 197-199.

³⁰⁵ Frederic S. Colwell, *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 145.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

behind a covering preface, but to unveil Shelley himself is perhaps no more seemly or profitable than unveiling *Alastor's* maid.”³⁰⁷

Yet the way Shelley has hidden himself in his works is part of the game concerning the Gothic novels, and reading for oneself and making connections is what he wants and expects the reader to do. This technique can carry over to the poetry. The reader is supposed to engage freely and creatively to the best of his or her ability, and to enjoy the process. When one does so, as I have done, and trusts one's hunches, one winds up arousing hostility, so it is fraught with danger, which is exactly what Shelley wanted, because, as he said in the preface, it was his desire “to startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life”. This is in keeping with the Gothic tradition, and is very much a goal of novels in that genre. Wordsworth identifies this tendency in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802):

. . . a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. . . . The invaluable works of our elder Writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespeare and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it.³⁰⁸

Moreover, concerning critical appraisals of *Alastor* and ways in which they will be helpful when dissecting *Laon and Cythna*, Colwell notes that completely separating Shelley from his narrator or his hero is going too far, because “the narrator's ‘solemn song’ is, like all deeply felt songs, a song of himself, a freeing or projection of the moribund farer within him, whose chronicle is cast with appropriate complementarity in the recognizable mould of heroic action.”³⁰⁹ The dichotomy of the preface, when compared with the action of the hero, can lead one to assume that Shelley has distanced himself from his hero in *Alastor*, and that he may in fact be expressing disapproval, but Colwell warns against it:

There is some ambivalence in Shelley's position, but it is incautious to conclude that Shelley was so out of love with his own errant hero that, as Donald Reiman suggests, he cast a wholly admonitory fable: ‘Although the poem has its autobiographical aspects, it should be read primarily as Shelley's warning to men not to abandon their social concerns.’³¹⁰

This is indicative that a fine line must be tread, allowing for multiple interpretations on a variety of levels. There is no one correct way to read either the novels or the poems. As Colwell sums it up, “If Shelley indeed condemns his hero and consigns him to the moral indigents, then the poet is out of love with

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 147.

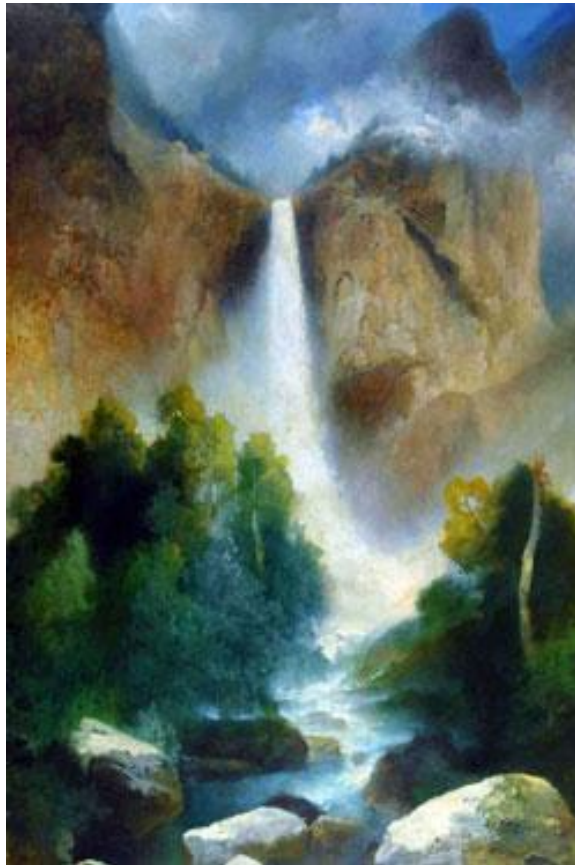
³⁰⁸ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Mason (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2007), 64-65.

³⁰⁹ Colwell, *Rivermen*, 146.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 148.

mankind at large.”³¹¹ Murphy prefers to completely separate Shelley from the narrator or Poet in the poem, but he also agrees with Colwell:

Throughout this chapter, my view has been that a more precise understanding of the poem is assured if one relates the poem and its preface to those conventions from the Gothic tradition with which Shelley was wholly familiar: the hero-villain, the quest-curse, the dream-vision, atmospheric imagery, and personification. . . . For his hero-villain is exactly that: hero, but not completely so, and thus destined to a quiet, desperate death; villain, but embarked on an undertaking nobly inspired, and so worthy of our understanding and sympathy.³¹²



Bridalveil Fall Yosemite National Park
By Thomas Moran 1924

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² *Angel*, 98-99.

IV

Cronin gives *Laon and Cythna* a detailed analysis in *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts*. He describes the action as it unfolds through the structure of the poem, one part of which is the following:

Laon and Cythna grew up together as children. They are separated in canto II when a band of soldiers raid their house. . . . Laon, after his capture is subjected to a distinctly sexual form of torture. He is chained naked, and spread-eagled on a grill at the top of a tower. He sinks into a fever during which he sees or dreams four corpses hanging from the tower. One of them he recognizes as Cythna, and grasps her rotting body, sinking his teeth in her flesh in a gesture which is partly an attempt to eat and partly a grotesque embrace. . . . Both Laon and Cythna suffer weird cannibalistic hallucinations.³¹³

When reading this, with the exception of the cannibalism, one feels as though Cronin is describing the opening scene of *Zastrozzi*, along with subsequent scenes. Murphy's description is practically identical, "In *Zastrozzi*, the young Verezzi is drugged, kidnapped, chained in a cave, and subjected to slow torture. The miraculous intervention of a thunderbolt, which almost kills him, leads to his escape, but he soon falls into Zastrozzi's power once again."³¹⁴ In addition, when Murphy discusses *Laon and Cythna* and the adventures which befall them, he notes that Laon's "enchainment and torture" offers "a close parallel in all essential details to the history of Verezzi."³¹⁵ Because the novels were supposedly rejected by Shelley, it is necessary to point out the minutest details where overlap with his poetics occurs. For example, to build on the scene quoted from Cronin above, we can trace this back to Canto Third, Stanza VII. In that stanza, Laon awakes from a nightmare to find Cythna bound by her captors, who plan to abduct her into slavery. She urges him to stay calm in Stanza IX, but he is in a frenzy of despair, and in Stanza X attempts her rescue. Yet if one knows *Zastrozzi*, Stanza X is quite funny, which is rather surprising because it is a dramatic moment and *Laon and Cythna* is not exactly recognized for its comedic properties.

The parallel scene in *Zastrozzi* occurs when Verezzi attempts his own escape in Chapter III. Verezzi is convalescing after his time in captivity, nurtured by Bianca, "and to avoid the consequences of despair, knives were denied him" (p 8). Some days later, Bianca brings him dinner which consists of "dried raisins in a plate. He was surprised to see a knife was likewise brought; an indulgence he imputed to the inadvertency of the old woman. – A thought started across his mind – it was now time to escape" (p 10). The scene, similar to this set-up, is hilarious; one cannot accuse Shelley of attempting to inspire fear:

He seized the knife – he looked expressively at the old woman – she trembled. He advanced from the casement to the door: he called for Bernardo – Bernardo entered, and Verezzi, lifting his arm high, aimed the knife at the villain's heart. – Bernardo started aside, and the knife was fixed firmly in the doorcase. Verezzi attempted by one effort to extricate it. The effort was vain. Bianca, as fast as her tottering limbs could carry her, hastened through the opposite door, calling loudly for Zastrozzi.

³¹³ Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1981), 98.

³¹⁴ *Angel*, 32.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

Verezzi attempted to rush through the open door, but Bernardo opposed himself to it. A long and violent contest ensued, and Bernardo's superior strength was on the point of overcoming Verezzi, when the latter, by a dexterous blow, precipitated him down the steep and narrow staircase.

Not waiting to see the event of his victory, he rushed through the opposite door, and meeting with no opposition, ran swiftly across the heath (p 10).

Stanza X of *Laon and Cythna* can be more richly appreciated if one has this passage in mind. Laon watches "with seeming careless glance" and notes that not many crew or comrades are around Cythna:

so I drew
My knife, and with one impulse, suddenly
All unaware three of their number slew,
And grasped a fourth by the throat, and with loud cry
My countrymen invoked to death or liberty! (X, ll 86-90)

This is a bit violent, in that Laon suddenly kills three comrades, and grasps a fourth by the throat, invoking death or liberty. It contains the tongue-in-cheek humor of the scene described above. Shelley does a good job of creating an action scene that could be straight out of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, something he is not exactly known for. The choice of diction using the words 'crew' and 'comrade' rather than 'gaoler' or 'jailer', as he does in *Zastrozzi*, confuse their identity and make it seem that they are on the same side as Laon, placing a twinge of conscience next to this violence. Are these comrades and crew that he has slain? Are these his countrymen that he is yelling to? It seems so, as no one else is around. This level of humor tinged with pain and the pulling in of social issues at the same time is an example of the subtle sophistication replete throughout *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. One could reasonably say this scene has a ring of the novels to it.

In Stanza XI, Shelley moves deftly away from humor. The situation gets more serious and subdued, as Laon is knocked out, bloodied, bound and is carried up a steep hill in response to his cry for liberty or death. Rapid transitions such as these occur in the novels too. Stanza XIII describes Laon's captivity, and is reminiscent of the opening scene of *Zastrozzi*. Again the parallels are worth noting, even down to syntax. This is *Zastrozzi*: "At last they stopped – they lifted their victim from the chariot, and bore him to a cavern, which yawned in a dell close by" (p 3). This *Laon and Cythna*: "They bore me to a cavern in the hill" (XIII, l 109). Verezzi is guided along the paths of the cavern, so is Laon. Verezzi is stripped naked, chained and is given a pitcher of water and a pittance of bread. Laon endures much the same thing. One difference is that Verezzi is in a cave in the darkness, while Laon is up on a rock outside. Both faint in a frenzy. Laon then sees the ship in which Cythna is a prisoner sailing away, and he longs to die. In Stanza XXI, Laon begins to experience starvation; he had "spurned aside / The water-vessel" (XXI, ll 184-185) and his crust of bread was as dust (XXI, ll 186-189). Verezzi also expects to die by starvation, the cave cracks open in a storm, his naked body is pelted with hail, his pitcher of water is broken, and "he cast from him the crust which alone could now retard the rapid advances of death" (p 5). These scenes are virtually identical, though Laon spurns the water vessel, while Verezzi tosses away the crust of bread.

V

When Cronin describes the various hallucinations the characters experience, he is identifying a Gothic construct which for Sedgwick is 'the veil' and which Wright identifies as the way dreams impact reality in Gothic novels.³¹⁶ Shelley himself uses the word 'veil' twice in Canto First of *Laon and Cythna*, the first time in Stanza XXIX describing the 'fiend', "beneath the veil / Of food and mirth, hiding his mortal head;" (ll 257-258), and again in Stanza LII, "thro' such veil was seen / That work of subtlest power, divine and rare;" (ll 464-465). The first example veils the concept of death, the second that of divinity. Again toward the end of the poem, as Laon and Cythna are near death, Shelley uses the same vocabulary, "the mighty veil / Which doth divide the living and the dead / Was almost rent" (Canto Twelfth, Stanza XV, ll 132-134). Moving between various states of consciousness, both mentally and physically, whether expressed as a dream, a waking state, imagination, bliss, illness, hallucination, ecstasy or torpor, is a favorite of Shelley's, and one could say forms the backbone of his novels. There is a scene in *St. Irvyne* where Wolfstein wants to repent of his crimes, but "Ginotti rushed upon his troubled imagination, and a dark veil seemed to separate him for ever from contrition, notwithstanding he was constantly subjected to the tortures inflicted by it" (p 169). Murphy's explanation of *Queen Mab* is helpful:

To satisfy his intention, Shelley chooses a dream-vision as the most convenient technique to present metaphysical experience. Earlier we noted its use and effect in *Zastrozzi*, *St. Irvyne*, and *Posthumous Fragments* to produce comparable extraterrestrial or psychic events, and Shelley was certainly familiar with the dream-vision device in Lewis's *The Monk*, Dacre's *Zofloya*, and Godwin's *St. Leon*, to say nothing of Volney's *Les Ruines* (which many commentators say is the source for *Queen Mab*).³¹⁷

Murphy distinguishes this Gothic form from other types of dreams by saying, "Of course, dream and vision are common characteristics in the work of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and many other authors Shelley knew well, but what is particularly noticeable about the Gothic dream-vision is that it usually haunts, drives, and menaces, and arises from some such forbidding place as a castle, a graveyard, or a wild natural area."³¹⁸ A little later, he elaborates, "Recalling the main points raised about the dream-vision of the Gothic tradition, one can compare them with the third vision in *Alastor*: a highly emotional stage in the development of the dreamer, a supernatural figure or event, a dream that embodies a truth hidden from the dreamer in his waking hours, and finally the need to interpret and act upon the dream, which begins to haunt him."³¹⁹ Comparing the use of this technique in *Zastrozzi*, *St. Irvyne*, and *Laon and Cythna* will demonstrate the relationship between this complex poem and the novels. The first step will be to identify the dreams in the novels; the second, of contrasting them with the dream sequences of the poem.

First, here is one (#1) from *Zastrozzi*. Matilda, a character who is conspiring to conquer and possess Verezzi, suffers from hallucinations. Because of this overriding passion, she is tormented by her

³¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Coherence*, 140-175; Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 97-124.

³¹⁷ *Angel*, 56.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56n35.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82n17.

imagination while awake and cannot find peace. For example, "Often would desperation, and an idea that Verezzi would never love her, agitate Matilda with most violent agony. . . . Sometimes imagination portrayed the most horrible images for futurity; . . . nourished by restless reveries, the most horrible anticipations blasted the blooming Matilda" (p 63). Yet at the same time, Shelley is subtle in his choice of words. Note that she is "blooming" even though tormented. Next, Shelley writes, "Sometimes, however, a gleam of sense shot across her soul: deceived by visions of unreal bliss, she acquired new courage, and fresh anticipations of delight, from a beam which soon withdrew its ray" (p 63). This "gleam of sense", which seems hopeful, is a deception, rather than a return to sanity. She is constantly living in her imagination, usually planning for the future with fear and determination, or remembering the past and Julia's role in Verezzi's life and getting angry. Already Shelley is a subtle psychologist by detailing Matilda's desire for Verezzi to make her happy and her lapse into committing murder to achieve that.

Not surprisingly, Matilda suffers dreams in her sleep (#2), when she can sleep, which often she can't:

Sleep fled not, as usual, from her pillow; but, overcome by excessive drowsiness, she soon sank to rest.

Confused dreams floated in her imagination, in which she sometimes supposed that she had gained Verezzi; at others, that, snatched from her ardent embrace, he was carried by an invisible power over rocky mountains, or immense and untraveled heaths, and that, in vainly attempting to follow him, she had lost herself in the trackless desert .

Awakened from disturbed and unconnected dreams, she arose (pp 67-68).

This language recurs practically identically in the opening scene of *St. Irvyne*, in which Wolfstein, the hero, wonders about "that eventful existence whose fate had dragged the heir of a wealthy potentate in Germany from the lap of luxury and indulgence, to become a vile associate of viler bandits, in the wild and trackless deserts of the Alps" (p 113). Immediately following this dream sequence, Matilda plays music for Verezzi on her harp which is possessive of an Orphic quality. She is capable of being an enchantress in that way. That evening a scene occurs (pre-planned by her and Zastrozzi) which softens Verezzi's heart toward her, and in the realization that she may actually achieve her goal (#3), she again has nightmares:

Visions of unreal bliss floated during the whole night in her disordered fancy; her senses were whirled around in alternate ecstasies of happiness and despair, as almost palpable dreams pressed upon her disturbed brain.

At one time she imagined that Verezzi, consenting to their union, presented her his hand: that at her touch the flesh crumbled from it, and, a shrieking spectre, he fled from her view; again, silvery clouds floated across her sight, and unconnected, disturbed visions occupied her imagination till the morning (p 71).

In this passage, Punter finds the "silvery clouds" to be particularly interesting, though he is not completely sure what they represent, except "immediate dissolution", a phrase that he quotes from the novel (p 43). He associates the "silvery clouds" with Jung and alchemy, as clouds tend to dissipate and dissolve.³²⁰ This concept appears twice in nearly identical form in *Alastor*. For example, "By solemn

³²⁰ Punter, *Pathologies*, 70, 232n13.

vision and bright silver dream / His infancy was nurtured" (ll 67-68); and "As one that in a silver vision floats / Obedient to the sweep of odorous winds / Upon resplendent clouds, so rapidly / Along the dark and ruffled waters fled / The straining boat" (ll 316-320). The imagery occurs again toward the end of the poem, though in a more somber tone, "A Spirit seemed / To stand beside him – clothed in no bright robes / Of shadowy silver or enshrining light, / Borrow'd from aught the visible world affords / Of grace, or majesty, or mystery" (ll 479-483). These three passages connect *Alastor*, including both the Poet and his little boat, to Matilda's dream-vision experience in *Zastrozzi* very well. Silver is significant because it is the color of night, or the moon, involving a sense of mystery and transparency, unlike gold which is as resplendent as the sun. Moreover, the moon is inconstant, waxing and waning with the rhythms of the tide, as Shakespeare's Juliet stresses to Romeo, "O swear not by the moon, th'inconstant moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb, / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable" (Act II, scene ii, ll 109-111).³²¹ Silver is a highly malleable metal possessing "the highest thermal and electric conductivity of any substance", and both the moon and silver are associated with feminine energy. Silver is "lustrous", "soft", "resonant", "dulcet in tone" and "eloquently persuasive."³²²

Shelley describes Laone with similar imagery, "A Form most like the imagined habitant / Of silver exhalations sprung from dawn, / By winds which feed on sunrise woven, to inchant / The faiths of men" (Canto Fifth, Stanza XLIV, ll 388-391). And again a bit later, Laon and his dear long-lost friend, with whom he has been joyfully reunited, linger "beneath the gleams / Of silver stars; and ever in soft dreams / Of future love and peace sweet converse lapt / Our willing fancies" (Canto Sixth, Stanza I, ll 4-7). When Laon and Cythna enjoy their reunion a few stanzas later, Shelley uses very similar imagery, "from that green / And lone recess, where lapt in peace did lie / Our linked frames (Canto Sixth, Stanza XXXVII, ll 327-329). The child in the poem also has "silver-shining wings, so fair" (Canto Twelfth, Stanza XX, l 176), and when she takes Laon and Cythna in her boat as they journey to the Elysium Fields, they are "Wreathed in the silver mist" (Canto Twelfth, Stanza XXXIX, l 351). To return to *Zastrozzi*, soon hereafter Matilda obtains her goal and marries Verezzi, to her utter delight, but she is again tormented the day after her wedding (#4), for "her brain was whirled around in transports; fierce, confused transports of visionary and unreal bliss: though her every pulse, her every nerve, panted with the delight of gratified and expectant desire; still was she not happy: she enjoyed not that tranquility which is necessary to the existence of happiness" (p 77).

Punter and Chesser both noted the intratextual relationship between the four main characters in *Zastrozzi*, Verezzi, Zastrozzi, Julia and Matilda. This is the same thing that happens with Laon, Laone, and Cythna too. As Cronin points out, their experiences are similar in many ways. Moreover, later in the poem, Laon takes on aspects of Matilda, completing the Quadruple Alignment of Character schema. This means that Laon and Cythna (or Laone) share a dual nature, and Laon and Matilda do too. Laon and Cythna are benevolent, so the association of Laon with Matilda, an aggressive figure, adds a complexity to the poem which is unexpected. In *Zastrozzi*, the opposing structure in the Quadruple Alignment of Character is clear at the start, though it does get turbid as the novel progresses. In *Laon and Cythna*, these distinctions are

³²¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, rev. ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Cambridge: CUP, 1984, 2003), 110.

³²² Webster's, s.v. "silver."

more subtle and less squarely drawn, but they exist; Shelley is incorporating antagonism into his idealistic hero and heroine.

The above mentioned intertextual relationships have been raised because they are important in and of themselves, but they are by no means exceptional. This same thing occurs between *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. In some sense Wolfstein is a continuation of Matilda, for at the end of *Zastrozzi* her conscience is awakened and she wonders why she lives, and this happens to Wolfstein in the opening scenes of *St. Irvyne*. He winds up living with banditti, reclining on his mat in a cavern, “pillowed on the flinty bosom of the earth” (p 113) which is reminiscent of Verezzi’s enchainment at the opening of *Zastrozzi*. We further see these themes being replayed in *Laon and Cythna* and in many other poems. Therefore, intertextuality between the novels and the poems is stronger than has been suspected, except by Murphy. Both of the novels are rich with supporting evidence. As Kurtz mentions with brilliant insight for those who take the novels seriously, “Shelley rarely gave up an idea or an emotion. The history of his mind and of his art is the continual repetition, with ever deeper realization and more entranced utterance, of ideas, moods, and patterns that are discernible very early in his work.”³²³ Moreover, Chessser, though looking at the situation from a psychoanalytical point of view, identifies a bisexual tendency in Shelley because he has energy evenly divided between two male and two female characters.³²⁴ For Wolfstein, in the opening pages of *St. Irvyne*, to be a continuation of Matilda, from *Zastrozzi*, is in keeping with his theory, it is just that the characters are then moving out into other texts, rather than remaining confined within one book. So in a sense, Shelley breaks the boundary of what a book is by going beyond and almost continuing the story in a slightly altered setting. This is a technique that William Faulkner would use about a century later (to be explained in the chapter on *Prometheus Unbound*).

Is this an artistic ploy on Shelley’s part, that is, a conscious strategy, or is it simply the luck of the draw, so to speak? This is an intriguing question and one which hopefully will be debated to a full extent by experts once the novels are deemed valuable enough to be considered. It is perhaps safe to say that Shelley did not map out his creative writing *in toto* at eighteen or nineteen years of age, but even then his commitment to his life goals, including his writing endeavors, was firm. Therefore, he had an overriding principle which guided him, though, as with Faulkner, the details wind through Shelley’s works in a serpentine fashion. Lew Welch, a forgotten poet who “participated in the San Francisco Renaissance/Beat literary scene” offers a helpful perspective.³²⁵ According to Gary Snyder, “As for poetics, jazz musical phrasing of American speech is one of Lew Welch’s clearest contributions.”³²⁶ Welch’s preface to *Ring of Bone* explains his process:

This book is organized into a structure composed of individual poems, where the poems act somewhat like chapters in a novel. The poems are autobiographical lyrics and the way they are linked together tells a story. Though any of the poems will stand perfectly well by itself, each nourishes and is enriched by the poems before and after it.

³²³ Benjamin P. Kurtz, *The Pursuit of Death* (London: OUP, 1933), 8, quoted in *Angel*, 101.

³²⁴ Chessser, *Shelley & Zastrozzi*, 19-33.

³²⁵ Gary Snyder, foreword to *Ring of Bone* (San Francisco: City Lights Books/Grey Fox, 2012), 13.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

I first became struck by the usefulness of such a form through a close study of Yeats' *The Tower*. . . . *Les Fleurs du Mal* is another example of such a book, as is *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. . . .

The shape of *Ring of Bone* is circular, or back and forth. Naturally such a form never ends. . . . It just keeps rolling along.³²⁷

With Shelley, the issue is a combination of poetics and novels, not individual poems linked together in one collection, but the general elucidation of intertextuality is similar.

The "silvery clouds" which are crucial to Punter reappear to Matilda in another dream when she is imprisoned by il consiglio di dieci. She cannot face death and is tormented (#5). In sleep, "Strangely brilliant and silvery clouds seemed to flit before her sight" (p 96), but yet she seems to be conscious, for "her situation forgotten, she lay entranced" (p 96). She has a dream which is "so like reality" that it "made a strong impression" upon her soul (p 96). States of reality are confused and it is hard to tell if she is awake or asleep. It is a conversion dream which works for Matilda, because she has found a level of peace which previously eluded her. How serious Shelley is it is hard to say, but he is very good at describing the altered state of consciousness. The dream contains an element of humor and irony in it, but there is also a level of sincerity. In some sense, however, Matilda's part in the story ends with her arrest, reminding one of *The Cenci*, for some critics feel that after Cenci's death one play ends and another begins. It is also similar to the epilogue of 'The Sensitive Plant' after the horrors of Part Third. Zastrozzi remains unrepentant and vengeful to the end, and it is the narration of his story which ties the novel together. In plot line it is similar to a famous play of the day, *Lovers' Vows* (1798) by Elizabeth Inchbald, but that play had a happy ending, and *Zastrozzi* does not:

She [Inchbald] was commissioned to adapt for the stage *Das Kind der Liebe*, a play by the German writer August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue, then greatly in vogue. . . . though *Lovers' Vows* is less weepy than *Das Kind der Liebe*, the final renucleation of the family in resolved tableau is a display of emotion which offers a certain kind of theatrical satisfaction but also valorizes the Baron's decision to marry the servant-woman he seduced.³²⁸

In *St. Irvyne*, there is a dream sequence confusing wakefulness with sleep involving Olympia, a young eighteen-year-old maiden who has fallen in love with Wolfstein though he is already in a relationship with Megalena. Olympia confesses her love, he denies her, she faints in his arms, and during this action in the parlor Megalena enters. Olympia runs away, "faintly articulating 'Vengeance!'" (p 148) and Megalena then demands that Wolfstein murder her. He goes to her home, the Palazzo di Anzasca, enters her bedroom, is readying himself to kill her, draws aside her clothing to bare her breast, and cannot bear to do it. He dashes away the knife, (#6) and the sound awakens Olympia:

"I was dreaming of you," said Olympia, scarcely knowing whether this were not a dream; but, impulsively following the first emotions of her soul. "I dreamed that

³²⁷ Lew Welch, preface to *Ring of Bone*, 17.

³²⁸ Paul Baines and Edward Burns, eds., introduction to *Five Romantic Plays, 1768-1821* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), xxii-xxiv.

you were about to murder me. It is not so, Wolfstein, no! you would not murder one who adores you?" (p 151)

The dream state has mirrored reality. She then gets up, finds the dagger and commits suicide. Her character is very similar to Matilda's but she, unable to conquer her passions, does not think of killing her rival as does Matilda, but of killing herself. Verezzi killed himself in a similar way, so again there is an interplay between the characters and events of the different texts. In *Laon and Cythna* as well, after they are dead, the child appears to them and tells them how one person made a speech, and it seems to be Laon's long lost friend. He concludes his speech in a melodramatic fashion, "'therefore shall ye behold / How Atheists and Republicans can die -- / Tell to your children this!' then suddenly / He sheathed a dagger in his heart, and fell" (Canto Twelfth, Stanza XXX, ll 264-267). It is similar to *Zastrozzi*, in which Verezzi "raised the dagger which he still retained, and, with a bitter smile of exultation, plunged it into his bosom! His soul fled without a groan, and his body fell to the floor, bathed in purple blood" (p 88). This passage of the poem has a ring of the novels to it too. The republican nature of the suicide in the elegant, Spenserian *Laon and Cythna* may seem to be light years from a Gothic novel, but to deny *Zastrozzi* a political platform is unfair; perhaps one of Shelley's goals is to break down the distinction between poetry and prose, or to integrate them by overlapping his story lines. Indeed, Anne Williams asserts that "Gothic is a poetic tradition", and that "'Gothic' and 'Romantic' are not two but one."³²⁹

Midway through *St. Irvyne* another story starts, that of Eloise de St. Irvyne. She meets a stranger who frightens her but seems to attach himself to her consciousness (#7). She tries but cannot seem to break his hold:

Yet even in her dream was the stranger present. She thought that she met him on a flowery plain; that the feelings of her bosom, whether she would or not, impelled her towards him; that, before she had been enfolded in his arms, a torrent of scintillating flame, accompanied by a terrific crash of thunder, made the earth yawn beneath her feet; -- the gay vision vanished from her fancy, and, in place of the flowery plain, a rugged and desolate heath extended far before her; its monotonous solitude unbroken, save by the low and barren rocks which rose occasionally from its surface. From dreams such as these, dreams which left on her mind painful presentiments of her future life, Eloise arose, restless and unrefreshed from slumber (pp 159-60).

There is a very powerful moment in which Ginotti is describing a waking experience which is like a dream sequence (#8). It begins with beauty and music and enchantment, and then culminates in destruction:

I heard a deafening noise on every side; it appeared like the dissolution of nature; the blood-red moon, whirled from her sphere, sank beneath the horizon. My neck was grasped firmly, and, turning round in an agony of horror, I beheld a form more hideous than the imagination of man is capable of portraying, whose proportions, gigantic and deformed, were seemingly blackened by the inerasible traces of the thunderbolts of God; yet in its hideous and detestable countenance, though seemingly far different, I thought I could recognize that of the lovely vision: 'Wretch!' it exclaimed (pp 183-4).

³²⁹ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 1.

Earlier in *St. Irvyne*, prior to Ginotti's description of his powerful experience with the gigantic monster, Wolfstein, in anticipation of the time when Ginotti would come to him to demand the fulfillment of the promise he had made, has an eerily similar dream (#9). This anticipates Ginotti's dream and further confuses the identity between Wolfstein and Ginotti:

While these thoughts dwelt in his mind, sleep crept imperceptibly over his senses; yet, in his visions, was Ginotti present. He dreamed that he stood on the brink of a frightful precipice, at whose base, with deafening and terrific roar, the waves of the ocean dashed; that, above his head, the blue glare of the lightning dispelled the obscurity of midnight, and the loud crashing of the thunder was rolled frantically from rock to rock; that, along the cliff on which he stood, a figure, more frightful than the imagination of man is capable of portraying, advanced towards him, and was about to precipitate him headlong from the summit of the rock whereon he stood, when Ginotti advanced, and rescued him from the grasp of the monster; that no sooner had he done this, than the figure dashed Ginotti from the precipice – his last groans were borne on the blast which swept the bosom of the ocean. Confused visions then obliterated the impressions of the former, and he rose in the morning restless and unrefreshed.

A weight which his utmost efforts could not remove, pressed upon the bosom of Wolfstein; his mind, superior and towering as it was, found all its energies inefficient to conquer it (pp 137-8).

Hume identifies the fact that "the key characteristic of the Gothic novel is not its devices, but its atmosphere."³³⁰ This atmosphere can be expressed with nature, such as the rustling of a leaf or wind blowing at night or moonlight in the ruins, or clouds covering the moon. Shelley's descriptions in many places are exquisite. He is a mature writer at this point, capable of evoking an atmosphere very well, and for him it is rarely one of horror. He is very good at capturing the majestic side of nature, so the novels begin to exhibit qualities of rapid-paced action, flowing yet unadorned descriptions which evoke different moods, confused states of consciousness and identity, blurred states of health and wellness, disorder between genders, and indistinguishable traits between heroes and heroines concerning good and evil. The sparsity of his novels makes them timeless in some sense, prefiguring Ernest Hemingway. They are not period pieces though of course they reflect their times. Sweet expresses Shelley's affinity for nature succinctly:

Shelley's love of the changing and fleeting aspects of nature – the interest with which he watched the formation of mist and cloud, and the shifting hues of dawn and sunset – is, like his sense of structure, a natural result of the half scientific spirit with which he regarded nature, for it is in the changing phenomena of nature that her real life lies. . . . The most effective way of dealing poetically with the forces of nature is, of course, to personify them.³³¹

³³⁰ Robert D. Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic: a Revaluation of the Gothic Novel" (*PMLA* 84, 1969): 286, found in <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Articles/hume.html>, 6, (accessed June 1, 2009).

³³¹ Henry Sweet, "Shelley's Nature-Poetry" (*The Shelley Society's Papers*, ser. I, no. 1, pt. II, London 1891), 296, quoted in *Angel*, 71.

This quality has appeared in some of the dreams mentioned above, but not all. Some involve more internal states of consciousness. There is a dream sequence in *St. Irvyne*, as experienced by Wolfstein, which captures the aspect of nature and its power very well in terms of evoking the dream state. Wolfstein, like Eloise above (in dream #7), has lost power over his consciousness, and another being has invaded his mind and is always present. Wolfstein and Eloise are undergoing parallel ordeals, though we do not know they are siblings yet. Eloise's transpired only a few pages before, but as it is in a different story unfolding in the same novel, a barrier is erected, making it harder for the reader to easily connect the characters and their two mental states. In addition, we have known Wolfstein and Ginotti since the start of the novel, Eloise has just been introduced, and the person who is in her mind has not yet been named. Nevertheless, the following experience of Wolfstein's (#10) is very close to Eloise's and shows the use of mood through nature:

Ginotti, though now gone, and far away perhaps, dwelt in his disturbed mind; his image was there imprinted in characters terrific and indelible. Oft would he wander along the desolate heath; on every blast of wind which sighed over the scattered remnants of what was once a forest, Ginotti's, the terrific Ginotti's voice seemed to float; and in every dusky recess, favoured by the descending shades of gloomy night, his form appeared to lurk, and, with frightful glare, his eye to penetrate the conscience-stricken Wolfstein as he walked. A falling leaf, or a hare starting from her heathy seat, caused him to shrink with affright; yet, though dreading loneliness, he was irresistibly compelled to seek for solitude (p 167).



"Hare" by Dürer
© Albertina Museum,
Vienna. www.albertina.at

The Hare by Albrecht Dürer, Albertine Museum, Vienna, 1502

VI

Now, it is time to return to *Laon and Cythna* to discover how the various dreams mentioned above relate to it. The second of Matilda's dreams (#3) quoted from *Zastrozzi*, mirrors Laon's experience in captivity, though the order of events is different. Laon is starving and attempts suicide first, by gnawing his brazen chain, though he asks for forgiveness from Liberty for having done so in a moment of despair (Canto Third, Stanza XIX, ll 163-171). In his severe hunger he "chewed the bitter dust, / And bit my bloodless arm, and licked the brazen rust." (Canto Third, Stanza XXI, ll 188-189). This is a form of self- or auto-cannibalism, something which does not occur in *Zastrozzi*. There is a precedent for this in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with the story of Erysichthon of Thessaly, an atheist who angered Demeter. She cursed him by making him eternally hungry, and he at last ate himself.³³² This story is also told in Callimachus' 'Hymn to Demeter', both sources with which Shelley was probably familiar.³³³ Coleridge presents self-mutilation in order to survive in graphic fashion in the *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, another potential source for Shelley:

With throat unslack'd, with black lips bak'd
 Ne could we laugh, ne wail:
 Then while thro' drouth all dumb they stood
 I bit my arm and suck'd the blood
 And cry'd, A sail! a sail! (Part III, ll 149-153)

Verezzi is hungry, and expects to die, but he does not mutilate himself. He sinks in a crisis of fever, but then "his youth and good constitution prevailed" (p 9). Matilda, in *Zastrozzi*, does not harm herself either. She contemplates suicide, but is unable to follow through with it, as she is afraid of death. Also the fact that Laon's arm is 'bloodless' indicates in some sense he is already a specter, and is telling this story from a disembodied state.

Next Laon falls into "a fearful sleep", a "terrific trance" (Canto Third, Stanza XXII, l 191 & Stanza XXIII, l 199), and then he dreams of dead bodies hanging and blowing in the wind. As Cameron has pointed out, this scene is very similar to one in the poem, 'Zeinab and Kathema', from *The Esdaile Notebook*.³³⁴ In fact, in that poem, Kathema resembles Wolfstein from *St. Irvyne* too:

It was an evening when the bitterest breath
 Of dark December swept the mists along
 That the lone wanderer came to a wild heath. (ll 121-123)³³⁵

That is Kathema's experience, and Wolfstein's is the following, "Fast advanced winter; cheerless and solitary were the days. . . . It was one evening when, according to his custom, Wolfstein wandered late: it was the beginning of December, and the weather was peculiarly mild for the season and latitude. . . .

³³² Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Book the Eighth. (Written 1 A.C.E.)*, trans. under the direction of Sir Samuel Garth, <http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.8.eighth.html> (accessed December 3, 2010).

³³³ Callimachus, "Hymn to Demeter," trans. A. W. Mair, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/CallimachusHymns2.html> (accessed December 3, 2010).

³³⁴ Kenneth Neill Cameron, ed., Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Esdaile Notebook* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 148-54, as quoted in *Angel*, 114; Also in *Circle*, 4:1040-1047, Longman1:171-177.

³³⁵ Longman1:171-177.

Wolfstein reclined upon the heath; he retraced in mental review, the past events of his life, and shuddered at the darkness of his future destiny” (pp 168-169). The following lines continue Kathema’s story:

Courage and hope had stayed his nature long,
Now cold, and unappeasèd hunger, spent
His strength; sensation failed in total languishment. (ll 124-126)

This certainly resembles Verezzi’s and Laon’s experiences, both of whom faint, delirious with hunger.

When Kathema awakes, he smells and sees a woman’s’s dead body hanging on a gibbet, “And wildly in the winds its dark hair swung” (l 133). This is Zeinab, and he quickly commits suicide to join her in the next life, “He twined the chain around his neck, then leaped / Forward, in haste to meet the life to come” (ll 157-158). Wolfstein’s situation in *St. Irvyne* is different, not driven by hunger, but dead bodies haunt him: “the bleeding image of the murdered Olympia The pale corpse too of Cavigni, blackened by poison, reigned in his chaotic imagination and stung his soul with tenfold remorse” (p 168). In fact, Olympia had committed suicide, but Wolfstein feels that it was his conduct which caused it. Zeinab’s death and Kathema’s discovery of her is expressed in similar terms as Laon’s. Laon also sees the corpses hung “on high by the entangled hair” (Canto Third, Stanza XXV, l 220), though Laon will awaken from this nightmare. Similarities to Matilda’s dream (#3) in *Zastrozzi* are also clear:

A woman’s shape, now lank and cold and blue,
The dwelling of the many-coloured worm,
Hung there, the white and hollow cheek I drew
To my dry lips – what radiance did inform
Those horny eyes? Whose was that withered form?
Alas, alas! It seemed that Cythna’s ghost
Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm
Within my teeth! – a whirlwind keen as frost
Then in its sinking gulphs my sickening spirit tost. (Canto Third, Stanza XXVI, ll 226-234)

The ‘horny eyes’ recur in *Prometheus Unbound*; the warm flesh in *Zastrozzi*, for Julia’s body, though not discovered by police until some hours later, was still warm, or to be more accurate, “the blood, scarcely yet cold, trickled from her vestments” (p 91). These scenes remind one of Juliet discovering Romeo’s body:

I will kiss thy lips;
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them
To make me die with a restorative.
[Kisses him.]
Thy lips are warm. (Act V, Scene iii, ll 164-167)

In fact, in *Laon and Cythna* Canto Ninth, Stanza XXXIV, Cythna tells Laon, “Yes, yes – thy kiss is sweet, thy lips are warm –” (l 299) and then she discusses a willingness to die if she cannot live with him “Darkness and death, if death be true, must be / Dearer than life and hope, if unenjoyed with thee” (ll 306-307). In *St. Irvyne*, Eloise says to Fitzeustace when he asks her to leave her homeland, “Oh! With pleasure; what is

country? What is everything without you? Come, my love, dismiss these fears, we yet may be happy" (p 196).

Nowhere in 'Zeinab and Kathema', *Zastrozzi* or *St. Irvyne* are there images of cannibalism, although they did appear in Shelley's translation of *The Marseillaise*. One place where cannibalism does occur is in the Marquis de Sade's novel, *Aline et Valcour*, which is, in the tradition of Richardson, an epistolary novel. It deals with issues of colonialism, barbarism, utopianism and is filled with Sade's black humor. For this novel, Sade has been identified as the first Zimbabwean novelist.³³⁶ Sade "refers to 'Zimbaoé', but by this he means the capital of the Mutapa state in the north, where until 1759 the Portuguese had maintained a garrison. De Sade's source for the geographical knowledge he displays remains unknown, but was probably a French translation of a compendium of the Portuguese publications on the area. His interest in the light thrown on human societies by the voyages of such writers as Cook and Bougainville was obviously considerable."³³⁷ Sainville, a hero of the novel and a young captain of the regiment of Navarre, goes around the world in search of the lovely Leonore, who had been kidnapped in Venice. He winds up in this part of Africa, where cannibalism and many other atrocities occur, because, according to Beach, Sade wanted to "enable his imagination to conjure up an archetype of the ignoble savage."³³⁸ Beach explains:

Most of this article is devoted to a paraphrase of Sainville's adventures in Africa in order to make this obscure work available to an English-reading public, and the footnotes relate de Sade's picture to the reality as we know it; but in view of the contentious nature of his view of Africa, a few points should be made in advance. De Sade sets out to make the kingdom of Butua as revolting as possible, and it might easily be supposed that this was no more than a crude racist slur upon Africans. De Sade was rather more subtle than that. In the first place, the horrors of Butua . . . are certainly no worse than those of the societies of Europe described in some of his other works, and in fact de Sade's view of the human race was so cynical that it would hardly have been likely that he would have regarded Africans as being any different. De Sade, however, was also making a comment upon the concept of the noble savage of Rousseau, although he did not seem to regard the noble savage as an absolute impossibility. Indeed, as soon as Sainville leaves Africa he moves to the Pacific, where on Tamoé he finds 'a government which could serve as a model for all those of Europe'. It is, of course, significant that in the view of an eighteenth-century European the noble savage should be found in the South Seas rather than in Africa, but it does show that even de Sade did not think mankind beyond hope.³³⁹

Beach also notes that Sade was incorporating factual data into his novel, for "De Sade's reference to the cannibalism of the Jagas, who were indeed in the region of the port of Benguela in the previous century, is

³³⁶ D. N. Beach, "The Marquis de Sade: First Zimbabwean Novelist," *Zambezia* VIII (i) (1980): 53.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 53n2.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

not entirely based on his imagination, obsessed though he was by the subject. The Portuguese had frequently claimed that the Jagas were cannibals.”³⁴⁰

As Montaigne stated as early as 1580, when his *Essais* were published, “we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live.”³⁴¹ According to Salisbury, “Cannibalism is one of the last real taboos of modern society. As such, it evokes a powerful mixture of fascination and revulsion. So strong are these preconceptions, in fact, that both the public and the scientific community have repeatedly fallen prey to them.”³⁴² Some experts, such as W. Arens, feel that cannibalism never happened:

as the result of directed research, conversations with colleagues and some deliberation, I am dubious about the actual existence of this act as an accepted practice for any time or place. Recourse to cannibalism under survival conditions or as a rare instance of antisocial behavior is not denied for any culture. But whenever it occurs this is considered a regrettable act rather than custom. This position of course flies in the face of conventional wisdom and the numerous reports.³⁴³

Anthropologist Beth Conklin takes issue with Arens’ approach:

Ironically, although this argument that cannibalism never existed is based in a critique of colonialist mentalities, it seems to reflect some of the same ethnocentrism that lay behind European colonizers’ horrified reactions to cannibalism (Gardner 1999). Like the many priests, missionaries, colonial officers, and others who considered cannibalism antithetical to what it means to be human, scholars who insist that all accounts of cannibalism must be false seem to assume that cannibalism is by definition a terrible act—so terrible, in fact, that it could only have been invented by those with damaging ulterior motives. They appear blind to the possibility that people different from themselves might have other ways of being human, other understandings of the body, or other ways of coping with death that might make cannibalism seem a good thing to do.³⁴⁴

The problem is that civilized Europeans see savagery in others, but “almost no one has questioned the other side of this symbolic construct, the assumption that cannibalism was not part of European culture.”³⁴⁵ For Conklin, who has conducted in-depth studies of the Wari’ of Brazil, there is “substantial evidence that some people really did consume human flesh or bones in the past.”³⁴⁶ Her study of Wari’ mortuary cannibalism is designed to promote understanding of the “indigenous concept of compassionate

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 54n5.

³⁴¹ Michel Eyquem Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1958), 108-109.

³⁴² David F. Salisbury, “Giving cannibalism a human face,” *Exploration: The online research journal of Vanderbilt University* (15 August 2001), http://exploration.vanderbilt.edu/news/news_cannibalism_nsv.htm (accessed 16 August 2012).

³⁴³ W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy* (New York: OUP, 1979), 9.

³⁴⁴ Beth A. Conklin, *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 6.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

cannibalism”³⁴⁷ and to “call attention to the fruitfulness of thinking about cannibalism in relation to questions about how cultural frameworks for mourning guide bereaved individuals.”³⁴⁸

As discussed earlier, Shelley could have read *Aline et Valcour*. This may or may not be the source for his idea, but it is possible, especially considering the vision which Shelley intended *Laon and Cythna* to fulfill. According to Matthews and Everest, Dowden felt that ‘Zeinab and Kathema’ was “‘designed less as a piece of romantic art than as an indictment of widespread evils’ – both domestic and colonial”³⁴⁹ and the way that poem presaged *Laon and Cythna* has already been made clear. It should also be noted that Jonathan Swift used cannibalism in one of his most famous satires, ‘A Modest Proposal’, written in 1729 in “fervent support of the Irish cause”, a piece which “is still a model of satiric political parody.”³⁵⁰ This adds another possible nuance to the interpretation, because “Swift’s satire imputes cannibalism to the oppressors. Cannibalism and particularly the eating of children’s flesh are said to be punishments visited by God on the sinful people in the Bible; see Leviticus 26:29, Deuteronomy 28:53-57, II Kings 6:28-29, and Jeremiah 19:9.”³⁵¹

Shelley, following Swift, uses imagery of cannibalism in describing the tyrant’s guards:

Carnage and ruin have been made their food
From infancy – ill has become their good,
And for its hateful sake their will has wove
The chains which eat their hearts -- the multitude
Surrounding them, with words of human love,
Seek from their own decay their stubborn minds to move
(Canto Fourth, Stanza XXVI, ll 229-234).

The imagery is graphic, for the guards eat “carnage and ruin”, chains of ill “eat their hearts”, and, although not strictly speaking cannibalistic, the image of decay is like that of a corpse as well as of the decay of the potential of what a human being can become. Shelley inverts this imagery a little later, in Canto Fifth, for “Laone had descended from the shrine, / And every deepest look and holiest mind / Fed on her form” (Stanza LVII, ll 598-600).

³⁴⁷ Ibid., xviii.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., xxii.

³⁴⁹ Longman1:171.

³⁵⁰ Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal and Other Satirical Works*, ed. Candace Ward (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), iii.

³⁵¹ Jonathan Swift, *The Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift*, eds. Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins, NCE (New York: Norton, 2010), 295n†.

VII

There are numerous additional overlapping parallels between the novels and this lengthy poem, so only one more will be chosen and that is the question of possession. Prior to looking at the text of the poem, it would be prudent to consider how Shelley uses the word 'possess'. Thus far, he has used it concerning sexual relations when referring both to Harriet and to Mary, and one may well wonder if implying sexual consummation is his sole intention. That seems difficult to believe. Shelley had an excellent vocabulary and was aware of the nuances and symbolism of words, so his employment of this word in the sexual context is particularly pointed—it brings up the very issues he is worried about by evoking traditional marriage and women being owned as property within that context. Therefore, it seems he is aiming for a wider meaning.

In *Laon and Cythna*, Canto Fifth, Stanza XLII, "To hear, to see, to live, was on that morn / Lethean joy! So that all those assembled / Cast off their memories of the past outworn: / Two only bosoms with their own life trembled, / And mine was one, — and we had both dissembled" (ll 370-374). This offers a complex parallel structure. There is forgetfulness, and the two people, assumingly Laon and Cythna, are both 'dissembled', hiding under a false appearance. The imagery seems positive, that a moment of happiness, the dawn of a new beginning and a letting go of the past has at last arrived, but something is not right, because all is not as it appears. The stanza continues, "So with a beating heart I went, and one, / Who having much, covets yet more, resembled; / A lost and dear possession, which not won, / He walks in lonely gloom beneath the noonday sun" (ll 375-378). This is startlingly similar to the 1814 letter of Shelley's to Thomas Jefferson Hogg concerning his desire to possess Mary discussed earlier. Laon is strongly acting like Matilda, and so the good Laon has a less than pure quality in terms of Shelley's ethic of free love. It is surprising, and is a connection difficult to make without knowing *Zastrozzi* and the 1814 letter.

The complexity of Shelley's intertwining of these figures is stunning. Laon is in the gloom in broad daylight, and Shelley has also given him a negative quality in plain sight. The message seems to be that traditional marriage values, which include ownership or possession of another human being (in this case a female) will permanently block a new era from enjoying the light of day. Until that problem is rectified, the revolution of the Golden City cannot be realized. It makes Shelley's letter of 1814 a powerful statement of conscious irony, not as a reflection of Mary, but of the institution of marriage per se, and it destabilizes the text by bringing in a personal situation. Donovan describes it thus: "It is a dramatic and an arresting reversal but one that, on consideration, appears perfectly consistent with the poem's repeated stress upon the fragility of any state of possession, as well as with its tendency to imagine the underside of every condition of feeling as a secret that is not, or not fully, articulable."³⁵² This lack of articulation is also a feature of the Gothic. Shelley is not only moving between texts, but is consciously incorporating events of his own life into his oeuvre.

³⁵² John Donovan, "'Lethean Joy': Memory and Recognition in *Laon and Cythna*," in *Evaluating Shelley*, eds. Timothy Clark and Jerrold E. Hogle (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 135.

Donovan has examined the ways in which Shelley subjects the “reunion of private with public life in *Laon and Cythna* . . . to significant pressures”. His concern is with Shelley’s “representation of the French Revolution as moral example.”³⁵³

The nexus of these disruptive tensions is Laon himself; the secret desire (his incestuous wish to recover his lost sister Cythna . . .) which excludes him from uniting himself to the life of the joyous throng is purely a matter of a memory that he seems powerless to forget. Accordingly, and in the space of a stanza, his moment of jubilation is overturned: ‘He walks in lonely gloom beneath the noonday sun’.³⁵⁴

Memory and its import are traced by Donovan back to ancient Greece, where “those who presented themselves to undergo the strenuous ritual of rebirth at the Oracle of Trophonius were required first to drink from two fountains—one containing the water of forgetfulness, the other the water of memory.”³⁵⁵

The novels indicate that the phenomenon of renewal does not pertain to the French Revolution or to political systems alone, but to the individual as well. For example, in *Zastrozzi*, one of the main themes is relations between the sexes. Throughout this novel Matilda does everything within her power to win Verezzi, and to remove Julia (his betrothed) not simply from his life but from the planet. Matilda is a talented musician, and often when listening to her music Verezzi is “forgetful of everything else . . . But all her art could not draw Julia from his memory” (p 63). He is able to forget but only up to a point, and Matilda remains thwarted in her plan to capture him for herself. Finally, however, “A Lethean torpor crept upon his senses ; and, as he lay prostrate before Matilda, a total forgetfulness of every former event of his life swam in his dizzy brain. In passionate exclamations he avowed unbounded love” (pp 74-75). They are soon married, and all goes well until “At last, one evening, Verezzi, tired even with monotony of ecstasy, proposed to Matilda to take the gondola, and go to a festival which was to be celebrated at St. Mark’s Place” (p 82). At this point he sees Julia in a gondola and “The Lethean torpor, as it were, which before had benumbed him; the charm, which had united him to Matilda, was dissolved” (p 84). Matilda and Verezzi immediately return home, with Verezzi in a state of utter confusion, but the awakening of Julia in his memory was only temporary. He tells Matilda “I am ever yours, I ever shall be yours” (p 85). At this point, Julia appears before him in their dining room and disaster ensues. He kills himself, Matilda murders Julia even though Verezzi is already dead, and the problem of justice and of needing to cover up Julia’s murder enters the story (pp 88-91).

Thus, matters of memory (Mnemosyne was “the Greek goddess of memory and the mother of the Muses by Zeus”³⁵⁶) and forgetting (Lethe was “a river in Hades whose waters cause drinkers to forget their past”³⁵⁷) are present in *Zastrozzi*, and point to the revolutionary tension of *Laon and Cythna*:

³⁵³ Ibid., 133-134.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 135

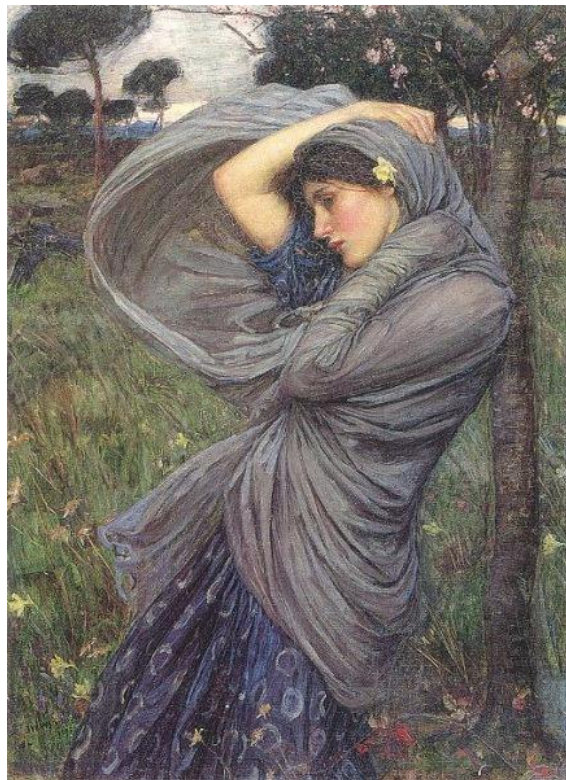
³⁵⁵ Ibid., 139.

³⁵⁶ Webster’s, s.v. “Mnemosyne.”

³⁵⁷ Ibid., s.v. “lethe.”

The loss of the short-term memory of revolutionary achievement is what allows the counter-revolution to succeed. A delicate equilibrium of memory and amnesia is required to sustain the effort of radical human renewal, nothing less than a continual realignment of one's sense of the past with one's hopes for the future.³⁵⁸

In *Zastrozzi*, the action is exaggerated and violent, but those descriptors apply to the Reign of Terror too. Indeed, according to Duffy, "At the heart of *The Triumph of Life*'s vision of western civilisation . . . is the 'awful' spectacle of the failure of the French Revolution. And it *is*, undoubtedly, an 'awful' spectacle."³⁵⁹ It is not inappropriate to suggest that *Zastrozzi* could be allegorical of the French Revolution, with the violence of the ending not only signifying the Reign of Terror, but also issues in human consciousness necessary for a successful renewal of familial arrangements and political systems. *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* both test the relationship of the private life of the individual with the collective life of society as a whole, stressed by Donovan above. The novels read in relation to *Laon and Cythna* support the claim that Shelley "repeatedly insists that a systematic revolution in opinion, a *moral* and *intellectual* revolution, must precede any successful or lasting change in political institutions."³⁶⁰ In addition, although *Laon and Cythna* is about the Revolution of the Golden City, Shelley frequently employs imagery using the color silver, a subtle way of indicating his desire to improve the female condition.



Boreas by John William Waterhouse 1903

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

³⁵⁹ Duffy, *Sublime*, 192.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.

VIII

Cronin sums up the poem as follows:

To dream of ideal beauty, whether it be the beauty of a woman or the beauty of a political system, is then to incur a risk. The evil that the dreamer rejects is an evil within himself. The tendency of the ideal to project its own antithesis is the natural tendency of the rejected quality to reassert itself. . . .

If the man who commits himself to good runs a risk, then so does the man who commits himself to evil. He, just as much as the dreamer of the ideal, flouts an aspect of human nature, and risks that aspect reasserting itself. The tyrant rapes Cythna; his action is totally evil, and yet Cythna gives birth to a daughter who, both in physical appearance and in moral character, is not the tyrant's child, but the child of Laon and Cythna. The child is taken from Cythna and brought up by the tyrant, and yet, when Laon and Cythna are executed, she recognizes her true parents, and dies in sympathy with them. In committing himself to evil the tyrant has succeeded in bringing forth good.³⁶¹

Because of Cronin's description of the child, it is now necessary to address the issue of incest. Although certainly he takes poetic license, Shelley is known to be a poet who is respectful of and knowledgeable about scientific facts, who takes those facts seriously, and who incorporates them in his poems with alacrity and minute attention to detail. Leavis asserts that Shelley has a "weak grasp upon the actual", but numerous other critics have lauded Shelley's scientific acumen.³⁶² It is strange that Cythna is abducted by a tyrant, and then, for all intents and purposes, has a child which is not the tyrant's. This needs some careful consideration, because poetically speaking, Shelley could have arranged this another way, it needn't have been a flaunting of biological principles.

The entire issue of incest and why Shelley chose to employ it to express his vision is summed up by Donovan with expertise:

The theme of incest in *Laon and Cythna* forms part of Shelley's engagement with the larger theme of the personal life, and especially human sexuality, in its relation to public endeavour for good. . . . The positioning of the consummation of Laon and Cythna's love as its central episode enforces the status of the incest as both controlling symbol and thematic reference-point for the whole; it also ensures that the narrative pivots upon an action that in its nature sets a problem, one whose imaginative piquancy is matched by its aptness to raise difficult ethical issues.³⁶³

It goes without saying that incest is part and parcel of the Gothic tradition, and therefore is less shocking and prohibitive to a person like Shelley who was immersed in Gothic stories from a young age. For him it was in many ways a trope that it was second nature to employ. Cronin describes the poet as bringing "into relation through metaphor words hitherto unrelated, that is, hitherto unrelated words are joined together

³⁶¹ Cronin, *Thoughts*, 107-108.

³⁶² Leavis, *Revaluation*, 206; Carl Grabo, *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley's Use of Science in Prometheus Unbound* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930).

³⁶³ Donovan, "Incest," 57.

in kinship", a creative process which involves "a kind of verbal exogamy" by marrying, as Shelley expressed in *A Defence of Poetry* "exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change."³⁶⁴ This is what the Gothic does too, often to an extreme degree.

The editorial changes lessened the "imaginative piquancy" of incest, but the difficult ethical issues remain and are of important scholarly debate, so important that they seem to overshadow the question of scientific and biological procreation. It can be ascertained that the general scholarly consensus accepts the biological impossibility of the child's paternity as a natural part of the narrative structure of the poem, and denies the fact that Shelley understood how children were conceived, and that he was not one to flagrantly flaunt basic laws governing the physical world in the face of his readers. He has many other tools with which to shock them, and his visionary expressiveness notwithstanding, he employs scientific precision with consistency. Although he wrote, "by his own admission, coterie verse", he respected the intelligence of his readers, and in return, he expected to be taken seriously.³⁶⁵ Therefore, the currently accepted mode of viewing this problem is less than satisfactory, and opens itself up to questioning.

One possibility is an immaculate conception, but that doesn't seem to be what Shelley is driving at. First of all, although there is much Christ-like imagery in the poem, he distances himself from Christianity per se, and from all religious dogma insofar as possible. In addition, there is a male present in the poem in the form of the tyrant, so that eliminates that scenario. Having the tyrant's sperm miraculously change into that of Laon's, so the baby looks like Laon, is another option. It is not as far-fetched as it might seem, if one recalls the Gothic construct of The Quadruple Alignment of Character, and in particular the way in which Shelley uses it. Punter points out that "Zastrozzi's aggression is clearly directed inward as well as outward; he is one of a long line of self-haters and thus represents all that Verezzi cannot own to in himself."³⁶⁶ Thus, Zastrozzi is in some sense a projection of Verezzi, and this has implications, as Punter explains, for the two figures can "hardly be on the same scene at the same time; if they are, they seem to cause an implosion of psychic impossibility."³⁶⁷ So in some sense, Zastrozzi and Verezzi are two halves of one whole, and if considered in terms of Laon and the tyrant, that might work here too. However, the tyrant is quite removed from the action, and is not a part of the story in the same way that Laon and Cythna are.

The only thing that works, then, is for Laon and Cythna to have a sexual union prior to her abduction. This is possible, and would have had to happen in Canto Second. In Stanza XXVI, they walk with hands clasped, "Cythna by my side, / Until the bright and beaming day were spent, / Would rest, with looks entreating to abide, / Too earnest and too sweet ever to be denied" (ll 231-234). He opens the next stanza with the line, "And soon I could not have refused her – thus / For ever, day and night, we two were ne'er / Parted, but when brief sleep divided us" (Stanza XXVII, ll 235-237). And even then, "in my arms she slept" (l 240). He doesn't go into the physical passion, but surely there is an intimacy here of tenderness, closeness and physical proximity, without any rules or social conventions to stop them. She learns of his vision, and they inspire each other to higher realms of thought, or as he says, "In me, communion with this

³⁶⁴ Richard Cronin, "Shelleyan Incest and the Romantic Legacy" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 45 (1996): 67; *P&P*, 533.

³⁶⁵ James Rieger, *The Mutiny Within: The Heresies of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (New York: George Braziller, 1967), 13.

³⁶⁶ Punter, *Pathologies*, 64.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

purest being / Kindled intenser zeal, and made me wise / In knowledge, which in her's mine own mind seeing, / Left in the human world few mysteries" (Stanza XXXII, ll 280-283). It seems they were able to teach one another, she even taught him as she slept (Stanza XXXIV, ll 298-306). At last he tells her that women need equality for there to be peace in the world (Stanza XXXVII, ll 325-332), and Cythna eagerly says, (to paraphrase) "Leave it to me, I'll do it!" At this point, for the sake of equality between the sexes, she agrees to go anywhere and do anything, brave any suffering in any location, in full awareness of the difficulty of this assignment. She mentions that she is still a child, and more time must pass before she can leave Laon on this mission, but in fact in terms of the stanzas, as soon as she is finished speaking, they part. Her line is, "We part!" (Stanza XLVII, l 415), so it does not seem that much time passes before she goes, even though time is a flexible commodity in a poem and in the Gothic tradition. That same stanza offers a climactic parting, for she "wildly prest / My bosom, her whole frame impetuously possess" (ll 422-423). After this, they go home "by the star-light steep" (Stanza XLIX, l 436), "where, in this mood, / Each from the other sought refuge in solitude" (ll 440-441). It is as though something very dramatic has happened between them in this Canto, culminating in a transformation in their lives. They are aware they must part, but are united in their plan, and exhibit a calm but firm demeanor, so physical separation is not an obstacle because they remain joined in spirit. Cythna is ready to go forth impregnated with Laon's ideas and his infant, and he likewise got strength and ideas from her. That makes the child, as a product of the action of this Canto, and of the union of their desires on a higher plane as well as a physical one, rather appropriate and acceptable both biologically and poetically.

Shelley reinforces this throughout the poem. When Laon first sees the child, she is with the tyrant, and he has not yet been reunited with Cythna. The child looks like Cythna to him, and he has a moment of intense recognition, "a gleam of bliss, / A shade of vanished days, — as the tears past / Which wrapt it, even as with a father's kiss / I pressed those softest eyes in trembling tenderness" (Canto Fifth, Stanza XXIV, ll 213-216). The tyrant and the child, having lost power at this point, are hungry, so Laon feeds them, and there is a beautiful exchange between himself and the tyrant over the child, "And he was faint withal: I sate beside him / Upon the earth, and took that child so fair / From his weak arms, that ill might none betide him / Or her" (Stanza XXX, ll 262-265). She is very giving and feeds the tyrant before she will eat, and only when he is satisfied does she herself eat. She was loyal to him and stayed with him when everyone else abandoned him, and she danced for him to make him happy, the moment when Laon first saw her. So, although she is with the tyrant, the concept that Laon is her father is already becoming apparent. She is sensitive, gentle, unselfish, and idealistic, kind even to the cruel tyrant; in a sense, she is the *Beau Ideal* in human form. She is the embodiment of the golden revolution, the product of the physical and spiritual union between Laon and Cythna. Shelley builds this up throughout the rest of the poem, and Cythna confirms it:

It was a babe, beautiful from its birth, —
 It was like thee, dear love, its eyes were thine,
 Its brow, its lips, and so upon the earth
 It laid its fingers, as now rest on mine
 Thine own, beloved. (Canto Seventh, Stanza XVIII, ll 154-158)

IX

One final Gothic possibility to mention here in terms of Shelley's private life, and also because of the way he worded the letter introducing this poem to Byron, is the striking similarity between what happened with Claire Clairmont, Lord Byron and Shelley during 1816-1818, and the action in the poem involving Cythna, the tyrant and Laon, a poem written in 1817 and published in early 1818. Like Cythna in the poem, Claire had dark hair and big eyes, and she was Mary's sister, making Shelley her brother-in-law. According to Holmes, it appears Shelley may have been involved in Claire's early correspondence with Byron, judging from the quality of the letters.³⁶⁸ Claire's child with Byron was a daughter, named Allegra, Shelley visited Allegra in the orphanage in Italy though Byron did not, and Shelley intervened on Claire's behalf with Byron unfailingly concerning her care. When Allegra passed away at a young age, the letters between Shelley and Byron possess a delicacy indicative of a mutual respect for one another, providing a gentlemanly acknowledgment by both parties that they shared fatherly duties. Byron questioned his parentage of this child in the early stages, and perhaps in his heart he always wondered.³⁶⁹ Tomalin again treats the matter with sensitivity and perspicacity:

On 24 June [1816] a sudden squall and misjudgment by the boatman [on Lake Geneva] nearly tipped them into the lake; Byron prepared to swim and to save Shelley, who could not, but he declared his intention of going to the bottom alone rather than endangering anyone else. The boat was righted; but the incident caused Shelley that very evening to lay aside Julie's story [Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*] and write his will. . . . [He left a legacy of] £12,000 to Claire, half of it to go to 'any person she may name if she pleased to name any other', which is clearly a tactful way of including her coming child. . . . Shelley's automatic assumption of responsibility for Claire and her child is proof of his acknowledgment that he was more to her than Byron could ever be, as much as of doubts concerning Byron's reliability. Later in the summer he did confront Byron with his responsibility, but it seems to have been taken for granted by both men that Shelley was in charge of Claire's life; she had, after all, described him to Byron as 'the man I have loved, and for whom I have suffered much'.³⁷⁰

Scholars such as Carl Grabo and F. S. Ellis bemoan the way Shelley's private life has impacted his appreciation as a poet and a thinker.³⁷¹ Nevertheless, because of Gothic conventions, it seems appropriate to mention this possible reading in conjunction with basic knowledge of Shelley's life. This is done in acknowledgement of Shelley's concept of free love, which Murphy describes as "more worthy than marriage"³⁷² and which Shelley iterated in his notes to *Queen Mab*, "love withers under constraint: its very

³⁶⁸ Holmes, *Pursuit*, 316-318; Claire Clairmont to Lord Byron, London, March or April 1816-22 April 1816 in *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1:24-42; Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 6 vols. (London: John Murray & New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 3:427-437.

³⁶⁹ Hay, *Romantics*, 110; Holmes, *Pursuit*, 317.

³⁷⁰ Tomalin, *Shelley and His World*, 58.

³⁷¹ Grabo, *Magic Plant*, vi; Ellis, "Some words," 1:viii.

³⁷² *Angel*, 115.

essence is liberty: it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear: it is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited, where its votaries live in confidence, equality, and unreserved."³⁷³

There is a scene in *St. Irvyne* which enacts this. Eloise was involved with Nempere, who took advantage of her innocence, but he has been killed. Fitzeustace has fallen in love with her and asks her to stay with him. She warns him that she has been another's, but he quickly discounts that and puts her at ease. Soon her child by Nempere is born, a son. "Fitzeustace cherished it with the affection of a father; and, when occasionally he necessarily must be absent from the apartment of his beloved Eloise, his whole delight was to gaze on the child, and trace in its innocent countenance the features of the mother who was so beloved by him" (pp 194-195). They must now leave France, a decision which Eloise graciously concurs with. Fitzeustace continues:

"But before we go to England, before my father will see us, it is necessary that we should be married – nay, do not start, Eloise; I view it in the light that you do: I consider it an human institution, and incapable of furnishing that bond of union by which alone can intellect be conjoined; I regard it as but a chain, which, although it keeps the body bound, still leaves the soul unfettered: it is not so with love. But still, Eloise, to those who think like us, it is at all events harmless; it is but yielding to the prejudices of the world wherein we live, and procuring moral expediency, at a slight sacrifice of what we conceive to be right."

"Well, well, it shall be done, Fitzeustace," resumed Eloise; "but take the assurance of my promise that I cannot love you more" (p 197).

In the Gothic tradition, the true identity of a person may not be revealed until the very end of the tale, a motif Letellier calls Lost Families. There are "lost and hidden family ties which mysteriously, ironically and inescapably reassert themselves". Often there is a "family relationship between villain and victim", and this occurs in both of Shelley's novels.³⁷⁴ To our knowledge, there is no blood tie between the tyrant, Laon or Cythna, only between Laon and Cythna, a taboo but one which Shelley has been forthright in placing up front in the story. It is not a hidden surprise revealed at the end but is introduced immediately and forms an essential element of the quality of the poem. In this sense, Shelley turns the Lost Families motif on its head, so that the surprise is not within the text, but outside the text, possibly in his and Claire's own lives. Here in this poem, the child recognizes her true parents at the end, and she dies with them, though not on the funeral pyre but of the plague.

Additional hints to the parentage of the child appear in 'Julian and Maddalo', when Julian calls on Maddalo early in the morning before he is up, so Julian plays with his daughter. This child has been identified by Reiman and Fraistat as Allegra Byron.³⁷⁵ The scene is reminiscent of the descriptions in *Laon and Cythna*:

The following morning was rainy, cold and dim;
Ere Maddalo arose, I called on him
— And whilst I waited, with his child I played:

³⁷³ Longman1:368.

³⁷⁴ Letellier, "Shelley and the Gothic Tradition," 91.

³⁷⁵ P&P, 124n2.

A lovelier toy sweet Nature never made,
 A serious, subtle, wild, yet gentle being,
 Graceful without design and unforeseeing;
 With eyes – oh speak not of her eyes! – which seem
 Twin mirrors of Italian heaven, yet gleam
 With such deep meaning, as we never see
 But in the human countenance. With me
 She was a special favourite: I had nursed
 Her fine and feeble limbs when she came first
 To this bleak world; and she yet seemed to know
 On second sight her ancient playfellow,
 Less changed than she was by six months or so —
 For after her first shyness was worn out
 We sat there, rolling billiard balls about. (ll 141-157)³⁷⁶

Julian has nursed her, which is itself noteworthy because usually men do not nurse babies. Godwin's description of how things might be once marriage is abolished is important here:

The intercourse of the sexes will in such a state fall under the same system as any other species of friendship. . . . It cannot be definitively affirmed whether it be known in such a state of society who is the father of each individual child. [Plato's *Republic* V:2.] But it may be affirmed that such knowledge will be of no importance. It is aristocracy, self love and family pride that teach us to set a value upon it at present. . . . One among the measures which will successively be dictated by the spirit of democracy, and that probably at no great distance, is the abolition of surnames.³⁷⁷

It is possible that Shelley began to implement this in his own life due to his principle of free love, as part of his attempt to bring about a radical transformation in the family. Todd notes that Godwin himself, among others, felt that Allegra was Shelley's biological child, though she offers no source for that.³⁷⁸

However, society did not take kindly to Shelley's abandoning of Harriet, and so it was necessary for him and those of his circle to put up a united front to deflect further unwanted attention. It is quite possible he was the father of Allegra, and Claire the mother of Elena Adelaide born later in Naples, but no one could attest to that:

Indeed, there are not a few [societies] in which heterosexual intercourse, even with the full consent of the adult participants, can be punished by ostracism, mutilation, or even death Also, the concern with the legitimacy of one's offspring causes the sexual freedom of the nubile or married female to be severely restricted in nearly all cultures, as no society wants a horde of children with no assignable father deposited 'on its doorstep'.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ Longman2:655-694.

³⁷⁷ Godwin, *Writings*, 3:454-455 (1793).

³⁷⁸ Todd, *Maidens*, 256.

³⁷⁹ Johansson, "Sex Negative, Sex Positive", 1182.

There is one more poetic piece of evidence which needs to be included, and that is the poem 'To Constantia', published by Shelley under the name Pleyel. Everest and Matthews explain:

Edward Silsbee, who came to own *Harvard Nbk 2*, noted below this poem – no doubt from Claire herself – 'Written at Marlowe 1817 wd not let Mary see it sent it to Oxford Gazette or some Oxford or county paper without his name'. . . . Certainly S.'s pet name for Claire Clairmont came from Brown's *Ormond; or, the Secret Witness* (New York 1799), for 'The heroine of this novel, Constantia Dudley, held one of the highest places, if not the very highest place, in Shelley's idealities of female character' (*Peacock Works* viii 77). . . . That Claire accepted the name is proved by the inscription on her former tomb at Antella near Florence, which gave her full name as 'Clara Mary Constantia Jane Clairmont'.³⁸⁰

The poem employs imagery similar to that used in *Laon and Cythna*, and was published in *The Oxford University and City Herald* on January 31, 1818, the same month as *The Revolt of Islam*.³⁸¹ For example, in 'To Constantia' musical imagery appears, and youthful slumber:

A deep and breathless awe, like the swift change
Of dreams unseen, but felt in youthful slumbers;
Wild, sweet, yet incommunicably strange,
Thou breathest now, in fast ascending numbers: (ll 23-26)

Laon and Cythna expresses something nearly identical:

And, in the murmur of her dreams, was heard
Sometimes the name of Laon: —suddenly
She would arise, and like the secret bird
Whom sunset wakens, fill the shore and sky
With her sweet accents – a wild melody! (Canto Second, Stanza XXVIII, ll 244-248)

'To Constantia' is a vibrating and passionate poem, with ecstasy that cannot be expressed without seeming to die or faint, a quality that Shelley employs extensively in the novels. The tone of the two poems and the love expressed between the two beings is reflective of an airy, intense, fast-paced attraction which is enchanting and seems to be able to rend the "cope of Heaven" (Constantia, l 27). Both poems are joined in syncopation, rhythm, and footwork, that is, basic poetic structure. One must be careful to avoid bio-criticism, but the situation is very Gothic concerning potentially confused human relationships, is not unreasonable when considering Godwin's (and Plato's) sway over Shelley, and therefore is worth mentioning.³⁸²

This completes the analysis of the influence of the novels upon Shelley's longest poem. Not all of the connections which exist could be made, but hopefully enough have been made to indicate that these novels were not altogether forgotten by Shelley. Rather they were perhaps like a private diary or love letter, something he cherished and relied on, but kept hidden in his study or in a private nook. Hay makes

³⁸⁰ Longman2:335.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 336.

³⁸² Conducting a paternity test on a locket of Allegra Byron's hair would offer confirmation.

it clear that Claire is the one Shelley shared his Gothic leanings with,³⁸³ and on one level this poem may be immortalizing her, her spirit of free love, and her first-born child. In the winter of 1820, when Claire had left the Shelley household and was residing in Florence, Shelley corresponded with her secretly:³⁸⁴

I have read or written nothing lately, having been much occupied by my sufferings, and by Medwin, who relates wonderful and interesting things of the interior of India. We have also been talking of a plan to be accomplished with a friend of his, a man of large fortune, who will be at Leghorn next Spring and who designs to visit Greece, Syria, and Egypt in his own ship. This man has conceived a great admiration for my verses, and wishes above all things that I could be induced to join his expedition. How far all this is practicable, considering the state of my finances I know not yet. I know that if it were it would give me the greatest pleasure, and the pleasure might be either doubled or divided by your presence or absence.

All this will be explained and determined in time; meanwhile lay to your heart what I say [Claire was despondent at this point], and do not mention it in your letter to Mary.³⁸⁵

Hay questions whether or not Shelley was, “as this hints, really contemplating fleeing Italy with Claire, leaving Mary and their baby behind?”³⁸⁶ The answer becomes less of a mystery when considered in light of the context explained above. This may also be a way that Shelley is claiming parentage for Allegra in an immortal way, through *Laon and Cythna*.



Child among Staked Roses by Berthe Morisot
Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, 1881

³⁸³ Hay, *Romantics*, 36-37.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

³⁸⁵ Shelley to Claire Clairmont, Pisa, 29 October 1820, 2:242-3.

³⁸⁶ Hay, *Romantics*, 203.

X

The time has come to consider Harriet's suicide. According to Cameron, although the final break-up of the marriage rests on Shelley's shoulders, he absolves Shelley concerning the suicide, noting that "Shelley was certainly justified in implying to Southey that he was not directly responsible . . . Many women have faced much worse situations without resorting to suicide."³⁸⁷ (Sir Neville Rogers agrees completely.)³⁸⁸ Harriet is seen by Cameron to have had an "obsession with suicide [that] was so strong . . . that she destroyed not only herself but her unborn child and left two children motherless."³⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Shelley wrote about suicide in *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, and later in *Laon and Cythna* and *The Cenci*. It is not inconceivable that he discussed this matter with Harriet in their private moments or with company. To assert that Harriet was obsessed with suicide is perhaps a bit strong, because "among mid-nineteenth century Londoners, suicide was very far from being a taboo subject."³⁹⁰

Several problems coalesce concerning Harriet's suicide: when did it really happen, the day she disappeared (November 9, 1816) or closer to the time her body was found (December 10, 1816)?; what happened in that interim timeframe?; and was she or was she not pregnant? Cameron finds that Harriet committed suicide closer to December 10, perhaps on December 7, because her body was recognizable, and citing *The Essentials of Forensic Medicine* (1965) he notes that "a corpse that has been in the water for a month is unrecognizable."³⁹¹ In addition, her suicide note was written on "Sat. Eve.", without giving a month or date, and December 7 was a Saturday.³⁹² The handwriting of the suicide note is not typical of Harriet's writing, but Cameron finds it to be authentic because she was under duress.³⁹³ (These matters are all discussed by Todd and Boas too, but as Cameron's description of Harriet's final days is deemed to be quite factual, his account will be relied upon throughout this section.) In addition, Cameron asserts that "there can be no reasonable doubt that Harriet Shelley was pregnant."³⁹⁴ He examines various opinions and statements to prove this,³⁹⁵ and one option he suggests to account for the month between her disappearance and the finding of her body is that perhaps Eliza "spirit[ed] Harriet away to have her child unknown to the parents or to Shelley."³⁹⁶

I would like to put forth my own theory. November 9, 1816, was a Saturday, and this was the day Harriet disappeared. She wrote a suicide note, left it in her lodgings, and that is why she did not date it – the date she disappeared would have been clear to all. One week later, William Alder, a friend of the family, at the request of her parents, "dragged the Serpentine River and all the ponds near

³⁸⁷ *Circle*, 4:801-802, 802n75.

³⁸⁸ Rogers, "Justice and Harriet Shelley," 13-20.

³⁸⁹ *Circle*, 4:802, 802n76, 774n18.

³⁹⁰ Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 195.

³⁹¹ *Circle*, 4:793, 793n62.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 4:793.

³⁹³ Kenneth Neill Cameron, ed., "Harriet Shelley to Eliza Westbrook, P. B. Shelley and her Parents, ?December 7, 1816" in *Circle*, 4:809.

³⁹⁴ *Circle*, 4:781.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:781-791.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:793.

thereto without effect.”³⁹⁷ Finally the body surfaced on December 10 and was spotted by a gentleman walking by. His account (given under oath at the inquest the following day) is as follows:

About 10 o'clock yesterday Morning the 10th day of December instant I was walking by the side of the Serpentine on my way to Kensington and observed something floating on the River which conceiving to be a human Body I called to a boy on the opposite side to bring his Boat which after some time he did to the side of the bank of the River on which I stood. I got into the boat & found that it was the Body of the deceased quite dead, there appeared no sign of life and I have no doubt that the Body must have lain in the Water some days.

(Signed) JOHN LEAVSLEY³⁹⁸

Thus, Harriet wrote a suicide note on Saturday, November 9, 1816, left her lodgings, and threw herself into the river without delay, though her body did not surface until December. The suicide note was found by the housekeeper possibly within hours, for she went back into Harriet's room that very evening and Harriet was already gone. The maid gave the letter to the landlady; the Westbrooks were immediately informed, as was Shelley. This means that those near and dear to Harriet learned of her suicide either on Saturday, November 9th or on Sunday, November 10th at the latest. This makes sense, because Godwin's diary entry for November 9, 1816 indicates "H S dies" underneath the main entry for the day.³⁹⁹ This is the space he reserved for later additions, so it appears that he was informed by Shelley about Harriet's disappearance and her suicide note shortly after Shelley learned of it himself, and then he made the entry.

Forensic Evidence

Prior to moving forward with my theory, forensic evidence must be considered. Could a body have survived in the water for a month and still be recognizable? According to experts, "Exactly how long a drowning or near-drowning victim has been submerged is hardly ever known."⁴⁰⁰ Particularly important is the following:

The progressive dissolution of the body in water is due to the action of several independent degradative forces, termed taphonomic factors (29-33). The factors include both intrinsic properties of the body itself and environmental factors such as water temperature, the presence of aquatic scavengers, the action of currents, tide, and rocks in the water, and depth of the water. Aquatic decomposition is a dynamic process that does not follow a specific timetable and can be slowed or arrested by changes in water temperature that occur with seasonal variation or with depth of submersion. Since there is an inverse correlation

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 4:778.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 4:777.

³⁹⁹ *The Diary of William Godwin*, eds. Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp, entry for 9 November 1816 (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010), http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/folio/e.215_0011v (accessed 1 February 2013).

⁴⁰⁰ Jerome H. Modell, "Etiology and Treatment of Drowning," in *Drowning: New Perspectives on Intervention and Prevention*, ed. John R. Fletemeyer and Samuel J. Freas (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1999), 25.

of depth with water temperature, bodies exposed to cold deep water for several years may show only moderate decomposition. . . .

Aquatic decomposition, like decomposition on land, progresses through a well-defined series of stages. . . . However, the rate of progression through the various stages is too variable to be used as a definitive guide to determine the time interval between death/immersion and discovery of the body.⁴⁰¹

A body in water will usually sink but because the specific gravity of a body is very close to that of water then small variations e.g. of air trapped in clothing have a considerable effect on buoyancy. Having sunk to the bottom the body will remain there until putrefactive gas formation decreases the specific gravity of the body and creates sufficient buoyancy to allow it to rise to the surface and float. Heavy clothing and weights attached to the body may delay but will not usually prevent the body rising. Putrefaction proceeds at a slower rate in water than in air, in sea water than in fresh water and in running water than in stagnant water. The principal determinant is the temperature of the water so that in deep very cold water e.g. the North American Great Lakes or the ocean the body may never resurface.

For the Thames, Simpson offers the following guidelines for resurfacing times: June-August: 2 days; April, May, September and October: 3-5 days; November, December 10-14 days; January, February: possibly no resurfacing. At water temperatures persistently below 45°F there may be no appreciable decomposition after several weeks.⁴⁰²

Therefore, although Harriet's body did not resurface for a month, it is not inconceivable that she drowned on November 9th, the day she disappeared.

A Different Suicide

In order to understand what happened next, a different suicide needs to be taken into account, that of "Lord Londonderry, Viscount Castlereagh—architect of the Grand Alliance, shaper of post-Napoleonic Europe, Foreign Secretary, and leader of the House of Commons."⁴⁰³ His suicide on August 13, 1822, approximately six years after Harriet's (and Fanny Imlay's, who had committed suicide one month to the day prior to Harriet, and whose suicide was equally hushed up⁴⁰⁴), caused consternation because there were only two options open to the jury at that time, that of insanity and that of intentionality, or *felonia-de-se*:

[T]o dub such an eminent man insane was to help label British power at its highest level as mad, and to pronounce Castlereagh *felo-de-se* was still worse. A sane and

⁴⁰¹ Michael S. Pollanen, *Forensic Diatomology and Drowning* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1998), 39-40.

⁴⁰² Derrick J. Pounder, "Lecture Notes: Bodies from water," (Department of Forensic Medicine, University of Dundee, 1992), 11. Found online as a pdf file at <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/forensicmedicine/notes/water.pdf> (accessed 1 February 2013).

⁴⁰³ Barbara T. Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Todd, *Maidens*; Hay, *Romantics*, 101-102.

deliberate suicide in 1822 was subject to even greater ignominy: he or she could be buried at a cross-roads with a stake through the heart.⁴⁰⁵

Therefore, the jury found him insane, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey, but not without public outrage:

Clearly, much of the hostility toward Castlereagh's funeral and burial was political. . . . But some of the hostility was moral and marked contemporary feeling about injustice in ignominious disposal of suicides. In June of 1823, less than a year after Castlereagh's death, there was another, sorrier burial of a suicide in London. Abel Griffiths, a twenty-two-year-old law student . . . was quickly dropped into a hole about five feet deep. . . .

Griffiths was the last London suicide known to have been buried at a cross-roads. Glaring legal inequities, like those apparent in the Londonderry and Griffiths cases, were to come to an end in mid-1823.⁴⁰⁶

Against this backdrop, the events following Harriet's suicide (and Fanny's too) are more easily explained. First of all, there was a desperate need to make sure that Harriet was not identified as a suicide. Thus, her disappearance was acknowledged, and the river dragged, but the note was hushed up and hidden. It later surfaced among William Godwin's papers, indicating that "Shelley and not the Westbrooks kept possession of the letter."⁴⁰⁷ According to Cameron, it "was not sealed, . . . [and] did not go through the mails. Probably Harriet – in the way of suicides – left it behind in her rooms,"⁴⁰⁸ confirming that the maid would have found it. Yet as Boas notes, "the letter was not mentioned by the landlady, the maid, or Mr. Alder. Surely the maid, finding Harriet gone, or the landlady when she did not return, would have found such a letter? (Fanny left hers on her bedside table.)"⁴⁰⁹ In order to answer that question, we may pose another, "Why [was] Matthew Arnold's haunting *Empedocles on Etna* . . . suppressed by its author?"⁴¹⁰ Gates suggests that he may have done so because of "Victorian attitudes toward suicide."⁴¹¹ Although Victorians "openly mourned death and sensationalized murder,"⁴¹² and they discussed suicide as well, the act of suicide by a loved one was different. Gates explains that "they seem to have deeply feared suicide and to have concealed it whenever possible."⁴¹³

Suicide was linked to morality, "such as gambling or illicit love affairs."⁴¹⁴ Problems of love were seen as valid reasons for committing suicide by both men and women, with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* being a case in point, along with Wordsworth's poem, "Tis said that some have died for

⁴⁰⁵ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6, 169nn5-6.

⁴⁰⁷ *Circle*, 4:807.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:809-810.

⁴⁰⁹ Boas, *Harriet*, 196-197.

⁴¹⁰ Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, xi.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, xiii

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁴ Lisa J. Nicoletti, "Resuscitating Ophelia: Images of Suicide and Suicidal Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999), 83.

love'.⁴¹⁵ Yet Harriet's case is complicated by the fact that she was abandoned by her husband, Shelley, who was of the landed gentry, and he was living with William Godwin's daughter. Clearly there was a need to minimize her suicide for the sake of the living, not only because of the legal consequences illustrated by Lord Londonderry's death above, but also because of sexual morality. In addition, her parents and Eliza would have wanted to protect her young children, Ianthe and Charles.

What really happened? After the note was found on November 9th, loved ones were informed. It was expected that Harriet's body would appear at any time, but when it did not, one week later (approximately November 16th), Mr. Westbrook had Mr. Alder drag the Serpentine. This was a tense period of waiting, because everyone in her inner circle knew what had happened. As for the letter, it was hushed up with bribery:

Did the habit of shunning a verdict of *felo de se* demonstrate that juries felt a humane tolerance or romantic sensibility towards those who died by their own hand? Or were they—or their coroner—simply responding to bribery and other pressures from those anxious to ensure honourable Christian burial of the deceased and even more to prevent the forfeiture of goods to the Crown or, later, the voiding of a life insurance policy? 'Great folk' had always had 'countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves, more than their even [fellow] Christian', as the clown in *Hamlet* complained (Act V, scene i).⁴¹⁶

All concerned would have wanted to keep the suicide quiet, so the bribe could have come from Mr. Westbrook or from Shelley, but probably from Mr. Westbrook as I believe he was notified first, and Shelley had been absent from Harriet's life for some time. Nevertheless, Shelley as her husband was given the letter by the Westbrooks. This accounts for the silence across the board, and also for the fact that the letter emerged among Godwin's papers at a later point. Cameron notes that when the Shelleys moved to Italy, "they left behind a box-desk which . . . contained material relating to the death of Harriet."⁴¹⁷ This would seem to coincide with a letter Shelley wrote to Charles Ollier from Bagni di Pisa in 1821:

What has been done relatively to my long-promised box from you?—or how am I to interpret your neglect on this subject, & your silence on others? If you have neglected to require a bill of lading from the Captain of the ship I shall probably never receive it: and the loss of the *desk*, would from its contents be a serious one.⁴¹⁸

The editor of the letters, F. L. Jones, directs our attention to an earlier letter, in which Shelley also wrote to Ollier requesting that Peacock send Mrs. Shelley's desk to Ollier immediately, and that Ollier should "obtain a key to be made for it, & send it with the books."⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), trans. Michael Husle (London: Penguin, 1989); Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 259-261.

⁴¹⁶ Anderson, *Suicide*, 192-193.

⁴¹⁷ *Circle*, 4:808.

⁴¹⁸ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Bagni di Pisa, July 1821, 2:311, 311n1.

⁴¹⁹ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Pisa, 4 March 1821, 2:271.

The Inquest

The inquest, held on December 11, 1816, returned a verdict of “Found dead in the Serpentine River.”⁴²⁰
Forensic evidence supports this:

A body recovered from water may or may not have drowned. This leads to two basic problems: determining both the cause of death and manner of death. Both of these problems are difficult when confronted with a body from water, particularly if decomposition has altered the classical findings associated with drowning or another cause of death. . . .

Drowning is distinguished from many other violent causes of death since the pathology of drowning does not correlate with the manner of death. . . . In principle, a body recovered from water need not have died in the water, and drowning may not be the cause of death even if the death occurred in water (1).⁴²¹

Thus, the problem of a legal verdict concerning suicide was avoided for forensic reasons, along with the fact that no suicide note was ever mentioned by anyone.

Now, let us turn to Harriet’s state of pregnancy (or not). At the inquest, four statements were taken, all under oath. Anderson finds that inquests which contain “verbatim notes of the witnesses’ depositions”, which is what we have in Harriet’s case, prove most valuable to the historian.⁴²² The first deposition is from the man who found the body, Mr. John Leavsley. He did not mention pregnancy, only that the body was not able to be resuscitated and had been in the water for some time. (His testimony has already been quoted in full.) Mr. Alder mentioned nothing about pregnancy in his statement either:

I knew the deceased she resided at No. 7 Elizabeth Street Hans Place she was a married Woman but did not live with her husband – she had been missing as I was informed from her House upwards of a Month, and at the request of her Parents when she had been absent about a week I dragged the Serpentine River and all the ponds near thereto without effect the deceased having for sometime labored under lowness of Spirits which I had observed for several months before and I conceived that something lay heavy on her Mind. On hearing yesterday that a Body was found I went and recognized it to be the deceased – she was about 21 years of age and was married about 5 years.

(Signed) WM. ALDER⁴²³

Next, here is the deposition from the landlady, Jane Thomas:

The deceased occupied the second floor in my House she took them accompanied by a Mr. Alder, she stated that she was a married lady & that her Husband was abroad she took them from month to month – she had been with me about 9 weeks on the 9th of November last, she paid her month’s Rent on the

⁴²⁰ *Circle*, 4:778.

⁴²¹ Pollanen, *Forensic Diatomology*, 1-2.

⁴²² Anderson, *Suicide*, 195.

⁴²³ *Circle*, 4:778.

Thursday preceding – she appeared in the family way and was during the time she lived in my House in a very desponding and gloomy way – on the 9th of November last she left my House as I was informed by my servant Mary Jones I did not see the deceased that day.⁴²⁴

This is the first mention of pregnancy at the inquest, which is rather subtle, “she appeared in the family way”. Certainly Jane Thomas is allowing for the fact that she may be wrong, and that this was just an impression.

Now we have a deposition from the servant, Mary Jones:

On Saturday the ninth of November last the deceased breakfasted and dined in her Apartments, she told me previously that she wished to dine early & she dined about 4 o’clock – she said very little, she chiefly spent her time in Bed. I saw nothing but what was proper in her Conduct with the exception of a continual lowness of Spirits – she left her Apartment after Dinner which did not occupy her more than 10 minutes – I observed she was gone out on my going into her room about 5 o’clock that day. I never saw or heard from her afterwards.⁴²⁵

This is critical for two reasons. First of all, Mary Jones was aware that Harriet was separated from her husband and living on her own, and she also knew that even the rumor of a pregnancy could imply marital infidelity, which in turn could severely damage Harriet’s reputation. Therefore, Mary Jones counteracted the landlady, Jane Thomas’s, statement in her own testimony when she said, “I saw nothing but what was proper in her [Harriet’s] conduct”. Clearly Mary Jones had a high regard for Harriet and felt that she was being misrepresented by Jane Thomas. Trusting Jane Thomas on this point is unwise, because she is only one voice out of four, her wording is sufficiently vague to allow for error, and Mary Jones’ deposition is opposed to it. Secondly, when Mary Jones states, “I never saw or heard from her afterwards” she is dispelling any notion that there could have been a suicide note. Of course, there was a note, and she herself found it, but the law of the land did not favor suicides, and society scorned abandoned wives, so Mary Jones is doing all within her power to protect Harriet’s dignity in her hour of sorrow and to preserve her reputation. Anderson notes that “witnesses (like juries) could be obstinately independent, and these depositions reveal the first-hand reactions of ordinary people involved in a case of suicide in a uniquely direct way.”⁴²⁶

The Press

Newspaper reports about this suicide appeared on the day of the inquest, and thereafter. Anderson notes that “snippets on suicide inquests” regularly appeared in local papers, and “the amount of space given to reports of suicide cases in every section of the press was . . . very much greater” than it is today.⁴²⁷ Let us look at the contents of this report:

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Anderson, *Suicide*, 195.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 214.

Yesterday [December 10] a respectable female far advanced in pregnancy was taken out of the Serpentine River and brought home to her residence in Queen Street, Brompton, having been missed for nearly six weeks. She had a valuable ring on her finger. A want of honour in her own conduct is supposed to have led to this fatal catastrophe, her husband being abroad.⁴²⁸

Although certain items are true, many parts of this briefing did not come from the statements which were taken under oath at the inquest. Cameron makes it clear that “Reporters were sent to inquests,”⁴²⁹ but if so they violated significantly in reporting the findings. It is a huge leap from appearing “in the family way” to being “far advanced in pregnancy”. Moreover, Cameron’s theory that Eliza spirited Harriet away to have the baby on November 9th does not hold up to scrutiny if she was still pregnant when found in December! One cannot have it both ways. This is sensational journalism, deeply colored by the attitude of the times toward suicide, and not to be confused with dispassionate reporting.

Shelley’s Role and Rationale

To his great credit, Frederick L. Jones, editor of Shelley’s letters published in 1964, defends Harriet:

Though Harriet’s landlady testified at the inquest that Harriet ‘appeared in the family way’, and *The Times* reported that the ‘respectable female’ taken out of the Serpentine was ‘far advanced in pregnancy’, there is no factual evidence of this. Nor is there any proof that Harriet lived with a man named Smith.⁴³⁰

I agree. In order to support this theory I would like to quote from two letters written by Shelley. The first was written to Mary on December 16, 1816:

It seems that this poor woman [Harriet] – the most innocent of her abhorred & unnatural family—was driven from her father’s house, & descended the steps of prostitution until she lived with a groom of the name of Smith, who deserting her, she killed herself—There can be no question that the beastly viper her sister, unable to gain profit from her connexion with me—has secured to herself the fortune of the old man—who is now dying—by the murder of this poor creature. Everything tends to prove, however, that beyond the mere shock of so hideous a catastrophe having fallen on a human being once so nearly connected with me, there would, in any case have been little to regret.⁴³¹

The second is a letter written to Lord Byron on January 17, 1817, which reiterates, “The sister [Eliza] of whom you have heard me speak may be truly said (though not in law, yet in fact) to have murdered her [Harriet] for the sake of her father’s money.”⁴³²

Previously, Shelley’s early letters to Godwin were examined and many errors were identified concerning Shelley’s own family; in this case, the same holds true for Harriet and her family. Shelley

⁴²⁸ *Circle*, 4:777, 777n36.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:781n36.

⁴³⁰ Jones, ed. *Letters*, 1:521n3.

⁴³¹ Shelley to Mary Godwin, London, 16 December 1816, 1:521.

⁴³² Shelley to Lord Byron, London, 17 January 1817, 1:529.

accuses Harriet of prostitution and Eliza of murder, and not simply of murder, but of murder out of greed. Eliza, according to Shelley, apparently first sought his fortune, and when that failed, her father's. He insists that Mr. Westbrook is dying in 1816, but Mr. Westbrook lived until 1834.⁴³³ Therefore, this letter needs to be read for what it is, which is an effort to turn Harriet and Eliza into women from his novels.

These letters were written after the newspaper reports were published, and in those days "ordinary Londoners were a good deal more likely than today to hear about cases of suicide."⁴³⁴ It appears that Shelley took these letters to an extreme on purpose. The falsehoods are so blatant that he wanted them questioned against his larger philosophy; that is, he wanted them to be seen through at some point, if not in the immediate present. For example, there can be no question that Eliza and Harriet shared a special bond of sisterhood. Accusing Eliza of murdering Harriet for money is the opposite of the truth. Mr. Westbrook generously supported Eliza, and she was helping to raise Harriet's children, an act of kindness that was reciprocated by Harriet.

This is not life imitating art, nor *vice versa*; it is fiction. Themes of prostitution, suicide, greed and murder occur in *Zastrozzi*, *St. Irvyne*, and 'Zeinab and Kathema'. Shelley is famous for collapsing characters into one another, a hallmark of these letters. Godwin, for example, was after Shelley's fortune, and Shelley (not Eliza) could be seen to have killed Harriet with his behavior, 'though not in law, yet in fact'. (Wolfstein felt that he had killed Olympia when she committed suicide over him in *St. Irvyne*.) Shelley has collapsed Eliza, himself and Godwin into one. Eliza takes the blame, as has Harriet, but neither did anything wrong. Shelley wants this identified; he does not want these letters taken at face value. They express the height of exaggeration and irony. Moreover, although it appears that Shelley has no regard for Harriet, this is a ploy. Repeatedly he rejects works of art, such as the novels and *The Cenci*, which in fact are very dear to him. The slander Harriet endured explains Shelley's unwavering commitment to keeping her reputation intact and spotless in Chancery. The letters are to be read as an exposure of the consequences of the paternalistic society, not an endorsement of it.

Harriet's Reputation

The adulteress in Victorian England was portrayed as "shallow and pitiable; . . . deceived and abandoned."⁴³⁵ This resonates with portrayals of Harriet, the first emanating from Leigh Hunt, and recorded later by Thornton Hunt, that she "was 'driven from the paternal roof,' then 'deserted' by 'a man in a very humble grade of life; and it was in consequence of this desertion that she killed herself.'" ⁴³⁶ Nowhere is Shelley's desertion of her mentioned, nor his high station. Another account is that "she first was taken up by a man, and, when abandoned by him, she took to any one."⁴³⁷ According to Lynda Nead, the "category of 'prostitute' was not fixed or internally coherent; it . . . could define any

⁴³³ Boas, *Harriet*, 212.

⁴³⁴ Anderson, *Suicide*, 214.

⁴³⁵ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 79.

⁴³⁶ *Circle*, 4:786-787.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:787.

woman who transgressed the bourgeois code of morality.”⁴³⁸ Charles Armitage Brown, Keats’s friend, writes in a letter:

One evening she went to her own relation’s house in London, where, on account of her bad conduct, the door was shut in her face, and her wants unrelieved, — on which she turned from that very door, and went and drowned herself.⁴³⁹

Godwin offers his conclusive voice:

The late Mrs Shelley has turned out to have been a woman of great levity. I know, from unquestionable authority, wholly unconnected with Shelley, (though I cannot with propriety be quoted for this) that she had proved herself unfaithful to her husband before their separation. Afterwards, she was guilty of repeated acts of levity, & had latterly lived in open connection with a colonel Maxwell.⁴⁴⁰

Cameron asserts that Shelley himself associated Harriet with a Major Ryan.⁴⁴¹ This is a later charge from Claire Clairmont which supposedly happened in 1814 before Shelley, Mary and Claire all ran off to the continent together.⁴⁴² It is unverifiable and unworthy of mentioning or consideration. Shelley did not need to accuse Harriet of adultery in order to gain Mary’s love. Claire, in hindsight, is protecting all three of them at Harriet’s expense, as Boas points out.⁴⁴³ Trewlawny sums it up as follows: “Friendless, and utterly ignorant of the world and its ways, deserted by her husband and family, Harriet was the most forlorn and miserable of her sex—poor and outcast.”⁴⁴⁴

Determining the truth against this onslaught of shame against Harriet is necessary. Her reputation has been tarnished and remains in tatters. Cameron goes to great lengths to sort out the conflicting strands and in the process he asserts that some of these stories have merit, while he eliminates others. He concludes, for example, that Harriet was not a prostitute, nor was she poor. He lends veracity to his discussion with the following claim:

All published accounts come from two sources: first, Shelley and the two men who were in daily association with him during the crisis, Leigh Hunt and Thomas Hookham; and, second, an informant of Godwin’s. To these we can add a third, an unpublished account by Claire, based on information supplied by Eliza Westbrook.⁴⁴⁵

Shelley was in a unique position and his writing in relation to Harriet has been discussed above. Neither Godwin nor Claire can be considered reliable sources concerning Harriet; Leigh Hunt clearly wanted to protect Mary Shelley (these stories emerged later, and Hunt was given a stipend by her after Sir Timothy, Shelley’s father, passed away and she inherited the estate), and Thomas Hookham, who would have

⁴³⁸ Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, 94-95.

⁴³⁹ *Circle*, 4:787.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4:790.

⁴⁴² White, *Shelley*, 1:345, 674-676n26.

⁴⁴³ Boas, *Harriet*, 210-211.

⁴⁴⁴ *Circle*, 4:788-789.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:784-785.

been the most objective member among them, got his data from a friend of Mr. Westbrook's whose identity is unknown.⁴⁴⁶ In addition, Hookham may have learned of the pregnancy rumors from the newspaper accounts rather than from this friend. Nothing which supposedly came from Eliza to Claire is verifiable. Eliza would not speak with Shelley when he called on her twice in December 1816, and he was Harriet's husband. Why would she speak with Claire Clairmont, the step-sister of Shelley's lover, when she would not speak to Shelley himself? It makes no sense. In short, none of this evidence holds up when surveyed carefully.

To conclude, these twin suicides need to be viewed from a broad social perspective, not as the result of an elite literary enclave. In many ways they represent the plight of Everywoman of that era. Gandhi expresses the situation clearly concerning terrorism:

Will you not see the writing that these terrorists are writing with their blood? Will you not see that we do not want bread of wheat, but we want the bread of liberty.⁴⁴⁷

Harriet's actions tell the lingering story of a sensitive young woman wronged by her husband and the consequences that placed upon her due to the *patria potestas*. She was maligned not only by Shelley but also by eminent persons such as Godwin and Hunt, when in fact it was Shelley and the other women in his circle who were engaged in risqué sexual behavior. In her defense, Harriet's case is probably one of the reasons that Shelley emphasized issues of justice, slander, and the power of words in *The Cenci*, though his interest in such matters is apparent in both *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*.

Fanny's suicide, on the other hand, speaks heartbreakingly of a maiden at the mercy of her parents or guardians. From her letters, it is clear that she had a vibrant interest in life. Only a couple of months before her suicide, she laments, "were I not a dependent being in every sense of the word but most particularly in money I would send you [Mary] other things which perhaps you will be glad of."⁴⁴⁸ She closes that same letter with an explanation:

I am much afraid you will find this letter much too long. If it affords you any pleasure oblige me by a long one in return—but write small for mamma complains of the postage of a double letter—I pay the full postage of all the letters I send & you know I have not a sou of my own.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 4:776.

⁴⁴⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *The Voice of Truth*, ed. Shriman Narayan (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan, 1968), 34, http://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/voice_of_truth.pdf (accessed 1 February 2013).

⁴⁴⁸ Fanny Imlay to Mary Godwin, 41 Skinner Street, 29 July & 1 August 1816, in *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1:56.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 59.

Lyric Interlude II

'Arethusa'

This poem was written in 1820 for Mary Shelley's drama *Proserpine*, along with the 'Hymn of Proserpine', and others such as the 'Hymns of Apollo and Pan', for her drama *Midas*.⁴⁵⁰ In the poem 'Arethusa', which was the princess's favorite poem in 'Roman Holiday', though she thought it was by Keats,⁴⁵¹ one of the main themes is an inexplicable change in tone, from hostile to placid, and this involves a mingling of identities. Arethusa is a Neriad as well as a muse for poetry, and this poem is based on the classical myth. The first stanza is light and happy, "And gliding and springing / She went, ever singing, / In murmurs as soft as sleep; / The Earth seemed to love her, / And heaven smiled above her, / As she lingered towards the deep" (ll 13-18). However, one should not be fooled by the spell which Shelley's lyrics cast; this is a Gothic poem.

In the second stanza, the tone intensifies. Arethusa has bathed in a river, the river god has fallen in love with her, and he begins pursuit. "And the beard and the hair / Of the River-god were / Seen through the torrent's sweep, / As he followed the light / Of the fleet nymph's flight / To the brink of the Dorian deep" (ll 30-35). She rejects his advances because she is a follower of Artemis, and wants to remain chaste. She dramatically pleads for help in the third stanza, and the ocean comes to her rescue:

'Oh, save me! Oh, guide me!
And bid the deep hide me,
For he grasps me now by the hair!
The loud Ocean heard,
To its blue depth stirred,
And divided at her prayer;
And under the water
The Earth's white daughter
Fled like a sunny beam;
Behind her descended
Her billows, unblended
With the brackish Dorian stream: --
Like a gloomy stain
On the emerald main
Alpheus rushed behind, --
As an eagle pursuing
A dove to its ruin
Down the streams of the cloudy wind. (ll 36-54)

Clearly in the third stanza there is a hostile pursuit of Arethusa by Alpheus, and she is desperate to escape. She succeeds in doing so with the ocean's help, and her waters do not mingle with his. In the fourth stanza it seems that the river god is continuing his hostile pursuit of Arethusa through caves, woods, in and under the ocean; in short, there is nowhere this river god will not go:

⁴⁵⁰ Longman 3:334-339.

⁴⁵¹ 'Roman Holiday: Shining and Natural English,' (Macmillan, 2009), DVD.

Under the bowers
 Where the Ocean Powers
 Sit on their pearly thrones;
 Through the coral woods
 Of the weltering floods,
 Over heaps of unvalued stones;
 Through the dim beams
 Which amid the streams
 Weave a network of coloured light;
 And under the caves,
 Where the shadowy waves
 Are as green as the forest's night:— (ll 55-66)

One expects Arethusa to be fleeing more passionately than ever to escape, with Shelley, Artemis and the earth her allies in that as the poem continues, but the final few lines of the fourth stanza offer a surprise: "And up through the rifts / Of the mountain cliffs / They passed to their Dorian home" (ll 70-72). Arethusa did not want to succumb to Alpheus, but somehow by the end of the fourth stanza they have become united. How did this happen? When did this happen? Shelley does not describe it or dwell on it, but the union has occurred through the process of the journey and pursuit in the fourth stanza. Moreover, all of the aggression and hostility has been removed.

In Cronin's discerning essay, "Shelleyan Incest and the Romantic Legacy," he notes:

It is characteristic of Shelley's poems that their motive power is love. The poems drive towards "the invisible and unattainable point to which love tends," for that point outside which "there is no rest or respite to the heart over which [love] rules" ("On Love," p. 474) is the only point at which the poem can close. Love is a quest, and the poem can end only when the quest is completed, or abandoned.⁴⁵²

That idea is clearly operating here. A quest has been undertaken by "Alpheus bold" in the second stanza, and although he is a river god, he begins in the mountains by opening a chasm with his trident. This has significant consequences, for "All Erymanthus shook. / And the black south wind / It unsealed behind / The urns of the silent snow, / And earthquake and thunder / Did rend in sunder / The bars of the springs below" (ll 24-30). Similar expressions appear in *St. Irvyne*:

The battling elements, in wild confusion, seemed to threaten nature's dissolution; the ferocious thunderbolt, with impetuous violence, danced upon the mountains, and, collecting more terrific strength, severed gigantic rocks from their else eternal basements; the masses, with sound more frightful than the bursting thunder-peal, dashed towards the valley below (p 110).

Usually the south wind is seen as a benevolent force, but here it is "black" because it can bring about the rapid and intense melting of the snow which rushes down the mountain uncontrollably, bringing destruction with it. Yet somehow, the hostile nature of the quest by Alpheus of Arethusa has been overcome with her consent.

⁴⁵² Cronin, "Shelleyan Incest," 63.

Cronin astutely observes that in incest imagery, “for a poet . . . the primary objects of exchange are not women but words.”⁴⁵³ While incest is not the theme of this poem, rape is. Arethusa is a muse for poetry, and she is being aggressively pursued by Alpheus, who represents a poet. She resists, and flees, aided by external circumstances in the physical world and the cosmic forces of nature, but Alpheus is unrelenting. He pursues and pursues and will not abandon the quest, and at last she consents, and lets him approach her and they are joined. Shelley doesn’t elaborate on the why and the wherefore of it, only on the result, and the fact that the pursuit was a dedicated one.

The fifth stanza returns to an upbeat tone. “And now from their fountains / In Enna’s mountains, / Down one vale where the morning basks, / Like friends once parted / Grown single-hearted, / They ply their watery tasks” (ll 73-78). The middle of the stanza expresses how they are together morning, noon and night, and their rhythm mirrors the rhythm of life: “At sunrise they leap” (l 79); “At noontide they flow” (l 82); “And at night they sleep / In the rocking deep / Beneath the Ortygian shore;--” (ll 85-87). It is a peaceful, congenial, playful union filled with vibrancy, intimacy and beauty. It seems that this was only achievable because they are grateful to have each other, and they appreciate one another (“Like friends once parted / Grown single-hearted”). And yet it began as a hostile encounter, with Arethusa running for her life, and the forces of nature rushing to her defense and protection. It is in this same natural environment that they have now found their blissful state. Perhaps the final lines hold the key:

Like spirits that lie
In the azure sky
When they love but live no more (ll 88-90).

Cronin’s analysis again penetrates to the heart of the matter, for he observes that when the quest ends in completion, rather than abandonment, “the poems come to rest, [with, for example] Laon and Cythna blending themselves into ‘one reposing soul,’ and the hero of *Alastor* achieving a condition in which ‘no mortal pain or fear / Marred his repose (lines 640-41).”⁴⁵⁴ This is what appears to have happened to Arethusa and Alpheus too, but with a price. It is a tragic union, because they are no longer alive. Cronin explains, “Such repose is offered by the poems as a version of immortality, but it is an ‘immortality’ that, as the final lines of *Epipsychidion* make explicit, is synonymous with ‘annihilation’. . . . Love, Shelley would have us believe, can reconstitute the world, but only, it would seem, for so long as it remains unfulfilled, for so long as the point to which it tends remains unattainable.”⁴⁵⁵

This poem appears to be a light lyrical jaunt, but the mingling of Alpheus’s aggression with Arethusa’s horror, which is captured in the rhythm of the poem, is deeply compelling, almost chilling, and retains an underlying sense of Gothic horror. ‘Arethusa’ offers an example of the transformation of both the pursuer and the pursued, again a change of identity, of the dance of the poet with the muse, which seems to have included some aspect of violence for Shelley. It is a desperate pursuit culminating in a perfect union, embodying a musical quality which is uniquely his.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 63-64.

Chapter 3 – *The Cenci*

This chapter relates to the previous chapters by continuing the study of the novels in relation to the poetry, in this case, a play. A more sweeping approach will be adopted, now that the basic analytic structure has been applied to *Laon and Cythna*, and many of the critical elements have been identified.

The Cenci was written by Shelley in Italy between May and August 1819, while he was in the middle of working on *Prometheus Unbound*. After seeing a famous painting at the Palazzo Colonna on April 22, 1819, which at the time was considered to be by Guido Reni of Beatrice Cenci, and after exploring the old Cenci palace in Rome on May 11, the stimulation to put pen to paper was quickened. By May 14 he had begun. The first draft was finished by August 8, and was published at Leghorn, and “thus *The Cenci* is distinguished among his works as one of the few that were printed under his own eye.”⁴⁵⁶ To embellish the work, he had contacted “Miss Curran, at Rome, seeking to have an engraving made of the portrait of Beatrice Cenci for use as a frontspiece, but the expense was beyond his means.”⁴⁵⁷ Shelley was hoping that Covent Garden Theatre would inaugurate the play on the stage, but they declined. After this, Ollier published the work in London in the spring of 1820; a reprinted edition was released in 1821. “It was the only poem by Shelley of which there was a second edition in his lifetime, with the exception of the pirated issue of *Queen Mab*.”⁴⁵⁸

As Shelley wrote to Ollier, “The reviews of my ‘Cenci’ (though some of them, and especially that marked ‘John Scott,’ are written with great malignity) on the whole give me as much encouragement as a person of my habits of thinking is capable of receiving from such a source, which is, inasmuch as they coincide with, and confirm, my own decisions.”⁴⁵⁹ In a letter to Peacock he laments, “I am devising literary plans of some magnitude. But nothing is so difficult and unwelcome as to write without a confidence of finding readers; and if my play of ‘The Cenci’ found none or few, I despair of ever producing anything that shall merit them.”⁴⁶⁰ Shelley reported to Leigh Hunt:

Lord Byron, I suppose from modesty on account of his being mentioned in it, did not say a word of ‘Adonais’, though he was loud in his praise of ‘Prometheus’: and, what you will not agree with him in, censure of the ‘Cenci’. Certainly, if ‘Marino Faliero’ is a drama, the ‘Cenci’ is not: but that between ourselves.⁴⁶¹

The Cenci is the work in response to which Keats wrote his famous line, “You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you,

⁴⁵⁶ George Edward Woodberry, introduction to *The Cenci*, ed. George Edward Woodberry (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1909), ix-xi (hereafter cited as Woodberry).

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., x.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁵⁹ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Pisa, 20 January 1820 [for 1821], 2:258.

⁴⁶⁰ Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, Pisa, 15 February 1820 [for 1821], 2:262.

⁴⁶¹ Shelley to Leigh Hunt, Pisa, 26 August 1821, 2:345.

who perhaps never sat with your wings furl'd for six Months together."⁴⁶² Mark Sandy finds that this comment points up a conflict in style between Keats and Shelley:

Keats's poetic self withdraws from the world into a monastic vigil upon the solidity of forms into which his identity will be absorbed through 'self-concentration'. Alternatively, Shelley's expansive poetic spirit, munificently, unfurls into the world, dispersing itself among those sought after objects of desire. Although Keats identifies marked differences between Shelley and himself, this description of a concentric model of Keatsian contraction and Shelleyan expansion expresses both poets' sincere conviction that exerting their imaginative powers will, whether directed inwardly or outwardly, melt away the strictures of metaphysical reason.⁴⁶³

Even in those days, there was a secret appreciation of this play, if not by Keats, by Byron. For while Byron may not have openly expressed his admiration to Shelley, in a letter written on April 26, 1821, he did, and from Byron this praise is noteworthy, for he calls it "perhaps the best tragedy modern times has produced."⁴⁶⁴

Byron's impression has been borne out, for it is today a highly thought of work. Leavis disagrees:

it will be enough to recall limitations that are hardly disputed: Shelley was not gifted for drama or narrative. Having said this, I realize that I had forgotten the conventional standing of *The Cenci*; . . . For it takes no great discernment to see that *The Cenci* is very bad and that its badness is characteristic. . . Actually, not only is the 'whole piece' Shakesperian in inspiration . . . it is full of particular echoes of Shakespeare—echoes protracted, confused and woolly; plagiarisms, that is, of the worst kind. This Shakespearianizing, general and particular is—and not the less so for its unconsciousness—quite damning.⁴⁶⁵

Interestingly, Leavis attributes Shelley's failure to the fact that "he nourished the inner life of adolescence on the trashy fantasies and cheap excitements of the Terror school."⁴⁶⁶ This is true, but it was far from his only nutriment. As hard to swallow as Leavis' reprobation is, it is at the same time very helpful, because Leavis' denunciation is in the exact same vein as the criticism levied upon *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. Although the novels remain dust-covered and forgotten, *The Cenci* does not. Another critic, while recognizing Shakespeare's influence on Shelley, insists it was "the most elementary knowledge of Shakespeare and must have been in his mind since boyhood, . . . The character drawing, in fact, which is the strength of the play, owes nothing to Shakespeare."⁴⁶⁷

This is an insight which is as manna from heaven, because at last an expert has recognized that Shelley drew upon external sources, but this did not diminish his creativity, it enhanced it:

⁴⁶² John Keats to Shelley, Hampstead, 16 August 1820, in *Letters*, 2:222.

⁴⁶³ Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 23-24.

⁴⁶⁴ Cajsja C. Baldini, introduction to Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci, A Tragedy, in Five Acts*, ed. Cajsja C. Baldini (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), xii, xiin2.

⁴⁶⁵ Leavis, *Revaluation*, 206, 223.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁶⁷ Woodberry, xxvii-xxix.

Shelley's personal style is easily recognized both in its [*The Cenci's*] poetic and dramatic form; . . . It appears, to the editor at least, that the debt of Shelley to Shakespeare in the dramatic handling of scene and character is also superficial. . . . It is true that Count Cenci recalls King Richard III by his blitheness and by the presence of the religious element (though differently conceived), and also Macbeth by his invocations, in language, and Lear by the fact and violence of his curse; but he is not a compound of these characters any more than Beatrice is of Constance, Clarence, Macbeth and Hamlet, whose words or manner she employs. Both characters are creations of Shelley, original and entire, in the combination of qualities that makes vitality and in the reaction on life that expresses it. . . . Beatrice likewise is a character who owes nothing to any other in literature and is unparalleled by any other; . . . In all these, . . . Shelley is altogether himself; no other has any part in them, constructively or in expression.⁴⁶⁸

It is anticipated that this same respectful attitude will one day be allotted to the novels as well.

Stuart Curran's book, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* offers a main source of criticism on the subject, including a wonderful performance history of the play. It was not performed until the late nineteenth century, with performances continuing in different countries on into the early twentieth century because of the attention garnered due to the "legendary fame of Shelley as a lyric poet and revolutionary, which his centenary helped to intensify."⁴⁶⁹ This *avant-garde* performance bonanza, as thrilling as it was, did not last forever. *The Cenci* is a difficult to play to pull off, as Curran points out, for to "realize the tragedy on stage without believing in and reproducing its psychology is, perhaps, to court its failure."⁴⁷⁰ Although not performed very often throughout its history, it is nevertheless a *tour de force* which has had great impact.

In addition to Curran, many scholars have studied this drama, grappling with the epistemological issues it raises, including Carlos Baker, Robert F. Whitman, Earl Wasserman, Stuart Sperry and Donna Richardson, to name only a few. Murphy devoted the final chapter of his book on Shelley and the Gothic to *The Cenci*, indicating just how important this text is for an understanding of the role the Gothic plays in Shelley's writings.⁴⁷¹ The approach here will not be to duplicate that, as Murphy has done a superb job, and others have done so as well in terms of the existential matters. One of the things that can be done is to point out the ways in which the novels offer background information as to Shelley's longstanding relationship with the Gothic. This is not to indicate that one needs such knowledge to understand the play, for its full artistic efficacy is written into the text. On the other hand, if one has an interest in Shelley, and learns more about him and his youthful novels, it cannot hurt in terms of providing a heightened perception of this masterpiece.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., xxviii-xxix.

⁴⁶⁹ Curran, *Cenci*, 236.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁷¹ *Angel*, 152-185.

Woodberry explains that “Shelley himself lost interest in it. His final judgment is recorded by Trelawny.”⁴⁷²

‘In writing *The Cenci* my object was to see how I could succeed in describing passions I have never felt, and to tell the most dreadful story in pure and refined language. . . . *The Cenci* is a work of art; it is not colored by my feelings nor obscured by my metaphysics. I don’t think much of it. It gave me less trouble than anything I have written of the same length.’⁴⁷³

Woodbury also notes that “Galignani appears to have had some copies on sale in Paris, as Shelley writes of an advertisement of it in the *Messenger*, but it is unlikely that this refers, as he supposes, to a separate French edition.”⁴⁷⁴ This blasé rejection by Shelley is similar to that which he showed toward his novels, and so offers great promise. Yet if Shelley outwardly rebuffed his endeavor, the Italians, living in what he called the “Paradise of Exiles”, do not. As much as they appreciate his works, where according to Curran he is the most widely read and translated of all of the English Romantic poets, the *crème de la crème* of his oeuvre is *The Cenci*, patterned on their revered *bella donna*.⁴⁷⁵



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Juliet and her Nurse*
Private ownership, 1836

⁴⁷² Woodberry, xii, xiin2.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Curran, *Cenci*, 214.

I

Like Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *The Cenci* begins breathlessly in *medias res*, as does *Zastrozzi*:

Camillo: That matter of the murder is hushed up
If you consent to yield his Holiness
Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate. — (Act I, Scene i, ll 1-3)⁴⁷⁶

Murphy notes that within these three opening lines, Shelley has succeeded in introducing a range of topics central to the play, including "murder, religious tyranny, corruption, the power of money or possessions, and an atmosphere of secrecy and intrigue."⁴⁷⁷ Count Cenci is generally believed to be a dark character through and through, rather than a tragic hero with redeeming qualities. Curran notes that there is a good angel (Beatrice) and a bad angel (Count Cenci) and that these two characters are "in deadly opposition. Suspended in the isthmus of a middle state between these polarities of Beatrice and Cenci and completely overshadowed by them are the four subordinate characters of the plot: Camillo, Lucretia, Giacomo, and Orsino."⁴⁷⁸ An actress, Sybil Thorndike, who played Beatrice opposite Robert Farquharson, had this to say about the Count: "But it is a difficult part, and it would be very hard to cast today: it is not a naturalistic part at all. Cenci must be a genius, insidiously wicked and of immense size, presence. Farquharson had all but the size. But, oh, he was wicked! I was frightened being on stage with him."⁴⁷⁹

It is shocking then, that the opening lines of the play draw a connection to Verezzi, the meek hero of *Zastrozzi*, rather than to Zastrozzi himself. It is Verezzi who is kidnapped in the first paragraph of the novel, and it is that opening scene which rapidly reveals many of the themes which will be dealt with as the story unfolds. Therefore, although Count Cenci is indubitably bad, if one knows the novels (which admittedly many do not), a nuance enters, because one immediately thinks of Verezzi. This intertextuality points up Shelley's doubling and his tendency to interchange characters, a strategy which is on prominent display within *The Cenci* itself. The connection to Verezzi (or goodness) is confirmed when, in response to Camillo's lines, Count Cenci's answer is simple and immediate: "The third of my possessions – let it go!" (Act I, Scene i, l 15). There is no greed or avarice in this reply, regardless of the conduct which has led up to this concession being demanded by Camillo on behalf of the Pope. He doesn't try to fight with Camillo, to barter or cajole; there is no outrage expressed and no lengthy negotiation, he accepts it right away and it is finished. One could say that this is because Count Cenci is so guilty that he has no power to refuse, but it is a play and this is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the Count's greed which is not taken by Shelley, the opposite occurs. One could also say that the Count is so haughty that he doesn't care, but this is unrealistic, as people in positions of wealth and power do not surrender their possessions easily, and Shelley was familiar with both the human

⁴⁷⁶ Quotes are from Baldini, ed., *The Cenci* (1819), verified against *The Cenci* (1819), a facsimile (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1991) because Baldini introduces an error in Act I, Scene ii, l 83: 'From which he shall escape not' should be 'From which she shall escape not'. The Woodstock facsimile does not supply line numbers, and Longman2 uses 1821.

⁴⁷⁷ *Angel*, 160.

⁴⁷⁸ Curran, *Cenci*, 62.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 228-229, 229n135.

mind and the workings of the landed gentry. Therefore, the Count's actual linguistic statement on stage is one of acceptance and compliance in spite of what his behavior may have been, or perhaps must have been, offstage.

Count Cenci is a shrewd psychologist as well, for he recalls having heard that one of the Pope's nephews had sent an architect to view his grounds, and he realizes that he has been taken advantage of by the Pope. "I little thought he should outwit me so!" (Act I, Scene i, l 20). This is excellent material to render the Count a more subtle figure by putting into relief the penurious nature of the church, something that would have resonated with the Italian audience, but Shelley doesn't take it. Instead, Count Cenci becomes more wicked than ever by expressing his anger to Camillo and resolving not to let anyone witness his crimes in the future, or if they do, they must die for it so as not to be able to squeal on him. Count Cenci is quite transparent in his dealings with Cardinal Camillo; he may be evil but there is a disarming lack of cunning in his character thus far. Shelley intensifies that when Count Cenci hints that he murdered a man virtually for no reason, simply because the gentleman spoke with the Count's wife and daughter. Cenci confesses this so that he and the Cardinal can "converse with less restraint" (Act I, Scene i, l 60). Naturally the Cardinal is horrified, and issues a warning, "Thou execrable man, beware! –" (Act I, Scene 1, l 66), but the threat is child's play to Cenci, who replies, "Of thee? Nay, this is idle: we should know each other" (Act I, Scene i, ll 67-68).

What does it mean to know each other? Why does he want to be close to a man who is in the employ of the Church and who acts as a liaison between the Count and the Pope, one who in essence is aiding and abetting the Church in taking advantage of him? And why does he want to increase his exposure to the Cardinal, thereby increasing his vulnerability? One would think Cenci would become more reserved and play his cards closer to his chest, yet again, the opposite happens. Cenci's behavior is a public matter, so he has no reason to keep secrets, is what he is implying. He manifests a wisdom of human nature and of social customs too, because he notes that the Cardinal has told people that he has helped to reform Count Cenci, and so Camillo's vanity and his fear will keep him silent. In fact, Cenci is far more complex than he has been given credit for, it is just that his behavior is so shocking, rather like the Marquis de Sade's, that no one dares to consider him as anything other than the incarnation of evil. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley explains that "tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain."⁴⁸⁰ This is Sade's philosophy concerning sexual matters in a nutshell, which Shelley has expanded to the wider realm of human experience.

Cardinal Camillo exits and there is a brief soliloquy in which Cenci mentions the third of his possessions with some sense of disgust toward papal authority, but by this time the audience is so repelled by him that that cannot serve to make him a man to whom we want to lend any credence whatsoever, nor does it encourage us to question the behavior of the Church. So the dramatic possibility has been lost by Shelley. This may be because he knew the Italian people already hated Count Cenci, so rather than fighting that he builds up on it for the sake of his drama. But conceivably he could have played that both ways to milk the possibilities, and he does not, so he is aiming for something else with

⁴⁸⁰ *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 292 (hereafter cited as Clark).

Cenci's utter honesty about forbidden topics and his flagrant disregard of social rules and etiquette. This results in Cenci manifesting a full-blooded negativity which is beyond what most people can fathom, and corresponds precisely with what the Marquis de Sade does in his novels. Repulsion to Count Cenci here in Act I scene i is already so excessive as to destroy the drama to some extent, popular sympathy in Italy against him notwithstanding. Murphy is quick to point out that this does not make Shelley a sadist, but rather that he is taking issues of ambivalence and ambiguity and pushing them so hard and so far that the audience must "grapple with the process by which we might delude ourselves into accepting an ambivalent position."⁴⁸¹

One reason why Shelley might not have played up the Count's greed is because he is not greedy. This is highly simple, and therefore easy to miss amongst Shelley's magnificent linguistic portrayal of execrability. Yet it seems to express the truth. He is open with Cardinal Camillo rather than secretive, he does not cling to his possessions nor is he dominated by them. As a matter of fact, later in the play, in Act IV, Scene i, he explains:

When all is done, out in the wide Campagna
I will pile up my silver and my gold;
My costly robes, paintings, and tapestries;
My parchments and all records of my wealth;
And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
Of my possessions nothing but my name;
Which shall be an inheritance to strip
Its wearer bare as infamy. (Act IV, Scene i, ll 55-62)

Leaving aside issues of infamy and Cenci's crimes for the moment, this passage expresses a Godwinian desire to break free of the aristocratic inheritance of wealth. Godwin's recantation on this point has already been discussed, but Shelley's wholehearted desire to implement a new world order, coupled with the actions in his own life, indicate that he was willing to try it. Cenci is reflective of Shelley in this regard.

⁴⁸¹ *Angel*, 154-155.

II

In Act I, Scene i, a messenger comes from Salamanca, which is connected with *St. Irvyne*. Ginotti, the character who has dominated Wolfstein even when he has been absent from the action, is at this point explaining his history to Wolfstein (p 181). It is revealed that Ginotti received his education in Salamanca, a city in Spain which Behrendt explains had one of the finest universities in all of Europe from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, after which, along with the city, it fell in to decline.⁴⁸² *The Cenci* takes place at the end of the sixteenth century, so Salamanca is a good choice both historically speaking and for its connection to *St. Irvyne*. Ginotti tells Wolfstein that he murdered a classmate who had offended him purely because he was “fond of calculating the effects of poison” (p 181). This is not that different from Cenci murdering a man purely because he had spoken with his wife and daughter, something just revealed (Act I, Scene i, ll 61-65). Therefore, Shelley has drawn a parallel between Ginotti and Count Cenci through the reference to Salamanca.

Prior to the arrival of the messenger from Salamanca, Count Cenci has been discussing horrors such as torture, “I rarely kill the body, which preserves, / Like a strong prison, the soul within my power, / Wherein I feed it with the breath of fear / For hourly pain” (Act I, Scene i, ll 114-117). This is exactly the way that Zastrozzi treated Verezzi:

Zastrozzi, who, for inexplicable reasons, wished not Verezzi’s death, sent Ugo and Bernardo to search for him. . . .

“His life must not be lost,” exclaimed Zastrozzi; “I have need of it. Tell Bianca, therefore, to prepare a bed.” . . .

Zastrozzi, to whom the life, though not the happiness of Verezzi was requisite, saw that his too eager desire for revenge had carried him beyond his point (p 10).

Cenci’s torture is drawn with more taut, bristling perfection than in the novel, but the similarity is clear. This provides an overlap between Cenci and Zastrozzi, the fourth one revealed so far. Already an overlap has been disclosed between the Count and Verezzi (the opening lines beginning *in medias res*), the Count and Ginotti (poisoning someone for no reason), and the Count and Shelley (a desire to destroy the aristocracy). Two of these could be seen as positive (Verezzi and Shelley) and two negative (Ginotti and Zastrozzi), yet we feel quite certain that the Count is evil through and through. Nevertheless, Shelley could have made the Count greedy and he didn’t; he needn’t have made him share Shelley’s radical ideology but he did, so Shelley is drawing a portrait according to his own desirabilities with a sure and steady hand:

He [Cenci] has about him the axiomatic malignity of Jove. . . .we see him as a force, a prodigious manifestation of hatred. Monstrous as they are, his actions seem less evil than those of the Pope, . . . or of Orsino, . . . Evil in *The Cenci* consists in hypocrisy and self-serving. The Count stoops to neither.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² B1986, 205-206n181.

⁴⁸³ Jonathan Wordsworth, introduction to *The Cenci* (1819), a facsimile (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1991), i-ii.

Curran concurs that the Count is an honest man, “born with power, he has only to exercise it.”⁴⁸⁴ Swinburne recognizes that the Count’s “august and horrible figure is painted as naturally as nobly”, providing “evidence enough that if Shelley had lived the *Cenci* would not now be the one great play written in the great manner of Shakespeare’s men that our literature has seen since the time of these.”⁴⁸⁵

When the messenger comes from Salamanca, it is as though he brings relief, because the Cenci stops describing his passion for killing and inflicting pain. However, if one knows the novels, immediately an unexplained dread enters, because we know what Ginotti did there, and we can expect motiveless murders to be the result of this visitor’s news. Therefore, Shelley has taken a moment which should have provided some respite for the audience, and instead, for those in the know, has increased the level of terror exponentially. In Gothic literature, there is much discussion of the distinction between horror and terror, with Matthew Lewis employing horror in *The Monk*, and Ann Radcliffe preferring terror partly to distance herself from Lewis. Obscurity seems to reinforce a sense of terror, and, as Shelley has identified in *A Defence of Poetry*, there is a connection between terror, pain and pleasure, a concept explored by Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld) in an essay published in 1773 with her brother, John, called, “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror”. Radcliffe also wrote an essay on this topic published posthumously in 1826 called “On the Supernatural in Poetry”. There is quite a bit of debate about the sublime and its capacity to arouse a sense of terror, but one thing seems agreed upon, that “Terror is an emotion that stimulates the imaginative faculties through its very association with the unknown.”⁴⁸⁶ Here in *The Cenci*, the facts of the case are known from the start, so it is less the unknown which is frightening, than the way in which Shelley accomplishes his purpose through his dramatic skill. Unknown to most people are his referrals back to the novels, but when one knows the novels this at times lends a deeper sense of fear, at times of humor or comic relief which is not particularly built in to the play on its own, and at times clarity, a guidepost through the dark chambers of the Palazzo Cenci, which provide a sense of stability amidst the chaos Shelley presents. For our purposes, the words ‘terror’ and ‘horror’ can be used interchangeably, because that distinction is not critical for understanding the play.

In Act I, Scene iii, Count Cenci arranges a party in response to the news from Salamanca, a sumptuous affair to be held in a magnificent Hall in the Cenci Palace with relatives and nobility from Rome in attendance. Knowing the novels, one already suspects what is going to happen, so it is a question of confirmation, how will the bad news be broken? And what will the reaction be? What is surprising, but should not be after the way the Count has behaved already, is that he is utterly honest about the situation. He doesn’t try to pretend, he doesn’t try to gloss things over by impressing his guests or succoring their favor. He demonstrates absolute disregard for human sympathy and courtly etiquette. In fact, he acts a lot like Ginotti. At this point, Shelley has upped the ante, making it difficult for us to believe that he is sincere, and that he is not offering us a parody of some kind, because this is

⁴⁸⁴ Curran, *Cenci*, 72-73.

⁴⁸⁵ Charles Algernon Swinburne, “Notes on the Text of Shelley” (*Fortnightly Review*, May, 1869) quoted in Woodberry, 128 n 33.

⁴⁸⁶ Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 42, 47, 155-156nn14,25,56.

so completely contrary to human nature that he has broken all dramatic tension. The audience cannot maintain this story with a straight face, and yet it is not a comedy. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the stage productions have suffered so much. It is very hard to get an audience to listen to a man who has so little regard for human life. Murphy points out that “the psychological complexity that I have been stressing in the mature works is brought to a fine edge in the play and delicately completes, by emphasizing the dark compartments of the mind, the deep insight into human nature that Shelley possessed.”⁴⁸⁷ Certainly Shelley’s capacity to delve in to various psychological issues has been hinted at, but this has been rejected by him more than developed in the different scenes of the first act.

Wasserman has noted that “the Count, unlike Beatrice, performs his monstrous deeds without personal provocation and so without apparent dramatic motivation.”⁴⁸⁸ It is jeopardizing for the family, for the society, and even for Count Cenci too, who is being preyed upon:

Cenci:	No doubt Pope Clement, And his most charitable nephews, pray That the Apostle Peter and the saints Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of days Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards Of their revenue. (Act I, Scene i, ll 27-33)
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As has been mentioned, Shelley had opportunities to develop dramatic tension in the opening act by offsetting the goals of the church with Cenci’s character, but he did not capitalize on them. Instead, he rendered Count Cenci to be extremely honest, on the one hand, and overpoweringly evil on the other. It is unfair to say the Count is one dimensional, but the evil is so dramatically expressed that it takes precedence. Concerning Orsino’s portrayal, Swinburne felt the same way:

What was the latent breadth or depth of Shelley’s dramatic genius we cannot say, as he had not time himself to know. It is incomplete in the *Cenci*; for example, in the figure of Orsino the lines are not cut sharp and deep enough; he is drawn too easily and lightly; the picture looks thin and shadowy beside the vivid image we get from the old report of the Cenci trial. That sketch of Monsignor Guerra, the tall delicate young priest, with long curls and courtly graces, playing on crime as on a lute, with fine fingers used to music-making, might have been thrown out in keen relief against the great figure of Cenci; a Caponsacchi turned ignoble instead of noble, and as well worth drawing, had the hand been there to draw. As it is, he plays but a poor part, borne up only by the sweet strength of Shelley’s verse.⁴⁸⁹

Shelley’s style is unique; he crafted this play quickly but with care. The Gothic is his element, his *forte*, and his playground; it follows, then, that the characterizations of Count Cenci, Beatrice, and of the supporting characters are as he wanted them. He employed his dramatic talent with precision, nothing was overlooked.

⁴⁸⁷ *Angel*, 152.

⁴⁸⁸ Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: JHUP, 1971), 87.

⁴⁸⁹ Swinburne quoted in Woodberry, 127-128.

Count Cenci's lack of a tragic flaw has been identified as an aspect of melodrama:

In melodrama man remains undivided, free from the agony of choosing between conflicting imperatives and desires. He greets every situation with an unwavering single impulse which absorbs his whole personality. . . . By itself, such 'wholeness' is morally uncommitted: Shelley's Count Cenci is as totally devoted to evil as Ibsen's Dr Stockmann is to good. Both are debarred from that growth in personal awareness brought about by the *anagnorisis* or discovery of tragedy. . . . It follows that the undivided protagonist of melodrama has only external pressures to fight against: an evil man, a social group, a hostile ideology, a natural force, an accident or chance, an obdurate fate or a malign deity. It is this total dependence upon external adversaries which finally separates melodrama from all other serious dramatic forms.⁴⁹⁰

Therefore, in this play, as in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where "far-fetched coincidence brings about the unlucky deaths of Romeo and Juliet,"⁴⁹¹ or in Æschylus' *The Persians*, in which "the Persians are helpless victims of a vast military disaster," the element of sorrow is based on external circumstances, rather than internal conflict as in Sophocles' *Œdipus Rex* or Jean Racine's *Phèdre*.⁴⁹²

A melodramatic play tends to "extreme conflicts" and "extreme conclusions", with "stalemate, victory or defeat", being the only possible options.⁴⁹³ One of the main features of such a play (and Smith points out that "most of the serious plays ever written have been melodramas and not tragedies"⁴⁹⁴) is its 'monopathic' tone, as can be seen in Shakespeare's *Henry V* with the victory at Agincourt.⁴⁹⁵ "In melodrama we win or lose; in tragedy we lose in the winning like Œdipus Rex or Macbeth, or win in the losing like Hamlet or Antony and Cleopatra". Smith cautions against discounting this form as "naïve, trivial and second-rate, especially when compared with the rich complexities and broader moral dimensions of tragedy," because "it is heartening to cast private doubt and reservation aside, and enter wholeheartedly into a struggle against manifest injustice."⁴⁹⁶ Shelley's play is one of defeat across the board, as in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, "which must rank as the greatest melodrama of military disaster ever written,"⁴⁹⁷ or Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, "the play which most savagely exposes the stupid suffering and futile carnage of war."⁴⁹⁸ Shelley is addressing the way that social systems, to quote Virginia Woolf in an understated fashion, are "a bit limited, a bit thick in the head."⁴⁹⁹

Yet Shelley's is not a play of action as much as it is of inner warfare. Curran explains that the "power and potential significance of English Romantic drama . . . is in its focus not on action but on non-

⁴⁹⁰ James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, 1973), 7-8.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁹⁹ *Webster's*, s.v. "limited."

action,” and this may be one of the reasons that “we do not believe in it.”⁵⁰⁰ Beatrice’s rape scene is handled discreetly off-stage as in Greek tragedy, and much of the drama is “displayed rather through character than action, and in particular through the two leading characters, Count Cenci and Beatrice.”⁵⁰¹ Thus it is “not a playwright’s, but a poet’s play. It is written under a more liberal canon than that of stage-craft, under an older canon,—the canon of literature.”⁵⁰² At times the action lags or is not advanced forward in a way that makes sense, and there are aspects of the play which are not really connected to the action at all—“in other words it is not exclusively a play of plot.”⁵⁰³ This loose, fluid and flexible narrative structure is something that has been encountered repeatedly in the novels. What is remarkable is that Shelley is using a melodramatic format in a play dependent upon thought more than action. Shelley’s conception is perfect for tragedy but he has shunned more complex characterizations, as Swinburne immediately grasped. What, then, is he doing? Knowledge of the novels and their application to the questions of dramatic denouement can be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of this play.



Lucretia by Guido Reni, National Museum of Western Art
Tokyo, Japan, 1638

⁵⁰⁰ Stuart Curran, “Shelleyan Drama,” *The Romantic Theatre: An International Symposium*, ed. Richard Allen Cave (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1986), 71, 61.

⁵⁰¹ Woodberry, xv.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

III

There are thematic, plot and personality overlays between the novels and the play. These superimpositions pinpoint specific traits which are central to Shelley's body of work, and which suggest the direction in which he is moving within this drama. A few central themes, such as doubling, gender and sexuality, individual freedom, comedy or humor, speech acts or truth in representation, and justice, including divine justice, will be explored.

Doubling is perhaps the most obvious trait. While there is much disagreement concerning this play and what it means, most critics feel that the action centers on Beatrice and Count Cenci. Although Beatrice is frequently viewed as a portrayal of wronged womanhood, and her purity at the end of the play is expressed with poignancy, Rieger sees her as "a less 'poetical' though a more tragic version of Prometheus. She is in fact Shelley's Satan". Rieger finds "her fault of vindictiveness" to be the vice which leads her, and others who are associated with her, to disaster.⁵⁰⁴ Wasserman notes that Shelley's "tragedy of reality is drawn from the underside of his idealisms and that, however historically real and specifically human its characters, passions, and incidents, they are the particularized foci of an assumed dimension as embracing as that of *Prometheus Unbound*."⁵⁰⁵ When the actress, Sybil Thorndike, identified Cenci as a larger than life genius and yet evil being, she was describing mythological attributes. The same concept can be applied to Beatrice, and has been by Curran, who notes that in the preface Shelley says that "Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes." He counters this firmly by stating, "Shelley here, it must be emphasized, is referring to the Beatrice of history; his premises are inadequate to encompass the character whom he created."⁵⁰⁶

It seems reasonable to assert, therefore, that Beatrice and Count Cenci are in some sense abstractions that are battling it out with one another. This battle would fit in perfectly with melodrama, because the tragic tension inherent in one figure, such as King Lear or Macbeth, is split out into two, and makes their drawing swords with one another appropriate in terms of the action. But Shelley has written an intellectual play, and Cenci, although reveling in a passionate desire to inflict pain, is a rational being. He plots his crime against Beatrice step by step, and it is not a crime of lust, it is a crime of hatred. Cenci does not want to possess Beatrice as Matilda wants to possess Verezzi, or as Megalena wants to possess Wolfstein, both of whom want their lover to live; Cenci wants to destroy Beatrice and his whole family. This tendency towards destruction of an individual switches from the Count to Beatrice as the play unfolds. Count Cenci is aggressive at first, while Beatrice is horrified, but once the Count has been murdered, she becomes Sadean, and does not care whom she destroys in order to protect herself, her honor and her good family name.

This means that Shelley's melodramatic format is anything but simple. Even though the characters are drawn without the complexity that Swinburne sought in terms of 'cutting the lines sharply and deeply' of human vices and foibles, passions and desires, they are drawn on a larger scale. The action is moved out, as Shelley did with *The Marseillaise*, to encompass elemental aspects of the

⁵⁰⁴ Rieger, *Mutiny*, 125-126.

⁵⁰⁵ Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 127.

⁵⁰⁶ Curran, *Cenci*, 139.

human condition. Woodberry explains that “Shelley, consciously or unconsciously, was interested in the play as a social tragedy, and the Fifth Act really moves in a larger world than that of the fortunes of a family in their private life.”⁵⁰⁷ Shelley is concerned with the functioning of a human being within the limits of socially acceptable behavior. This is a Sadean dilemma. Mario Praz detects the Sadean influence in the way Cenci speaks, which mirrors the “perverse Saint-Fond in *Juliette*”. According to Praz, the threats which Cenci utters have the intention of “breaking laws which men consider sacred”, and sacriligiousness is also expressed in Cenci’s curse (Act IV, Scene i, ll 114-136). Beatrice, on the other hand, is seen by Praz as suffering in the same way as Sade’s Justine; she represents innocence maligned.⁵⁰⁸ Yet one of Shelley’s central gifts lies in his capacity to equivocate with his characterizations, a strategy that he exhibited with flair in the early novels.

Curran notes with certainty that Beatrice is her father’s daughter, astute, capable, and quick-witted. She exhibits a coldness, like Shakespeare’s Cordelia, “a tone which on first reading we are likely to find unattractive”. He asserts that “It requires a reader little effort to grasp the linguistic affinity between father and daughter,”⁵⁰⁹ but this does not mean that it is easy to see the full level of similarity, or doubling, they share. One way to observe this is in the structure of the play. Rarely are Beatrice and the Count ever on stage together, in fact they appear together only twice. The first time is in Act I, Scene iii, the banquet scene, where most of Beatrice’s dialogue is with Lucretia. One of the stage directions in this scene for the actress playing Beatrice is “*not noticing the words of Cenci*,” (Act I, Scene iii, l 132). She addresses the guests, Cenci interrupts her, she does not acknowledge that and continues defiantly speaking, almost threatening the assembled Roman nobility. Indubitably, she is making a plea for help, but it is done publicly rather than privately, against custom, and thus is not a format which the nobility can answer to favorably, even though they empathize with her. Cenci is too formidable a foe, and power in the societal structure rests with him as the father and patriarch of the family. At line 145 Cenci tells her to retire to her chamber; she curses him in reply, and the guests are all listening. She shares, on some level, Cenci’s public display of uncouth behavior, and like him, she is an expert at cursing. They appear on stage together again immediately in the next scene, Act II, Scene i, when Cenci enters and is surprised to see Beatrice there. He addresses Beatrice but she falls back and staggers to the door. She utters a line, but not to him, it is an outburst of shock because she wants to escape. This might take about one or two minutes to act out and is the final time in this lengthy play that Cenci and Beatrice appear together. They have appeared only twice in quick succession—not much stage time together in a play which supposedly centers on the two of them! This tendency has also been observed between Zastrozzi and Verezzi, so it provides another powerful connection with the novels.

⁵⁰⁷ Woodberry, xx.

⁵⁰⁸ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 114-116, 171nn62-67.

⁵⁰⁹ Curran, *Cenci*, 86-87.

IV

Sexuality, paternity, family relations and male-female relationships are at the heart of *The Cenci*. Therefore, it is necessary to consider Shelley's attitudes on these matters. According to Nathaniel Brown, "Nothing in Shelley's career stirred up more universal hatred than his attack on his country's sexual institutions, and when he had the temerity to defy them in practice" he suffered the singular defeat of the loss of his children by Harriet. "In the central irony of his life, he found himself assailed and vilified on all sides as the personification of the very thing he most detested, the habitual libertine and seducer, and he ultimately had to abandon the country for his own safety."⁵¹⁰ Brown explains:

The savagery of the attack is hard to imagine today. It is thus well to be reminded of its severity since it gives point to views which, while still controversial, scarcely seem so diabolically subversive as when he was alive. Because of his public flouting of his country's marriage laws and the unhappy consequences, he probably came as close as anyone during his day to occupying the archetypal role of "villain" in the popular mind, the unanimously "infamous Mr. Shelley." This image was compounded by his association with the satanic Lord Byron, his only serious rival for the distinction.⁵¹¹

Shelley considered his name "stigmatised & unpopular", and himself "an outcast from human society; my name is execrated by all who understand its entire import,—by those very beings whose happiness I ardently desire."⁵¹² He reiterated this when he wrote, "I am regarded by all [Englishpersons] who know or hear of me except, I think on the whole five individuals as a rare prodigy of crime & pollution whose look even might infect."⁵¹³ It is not difficult to ascertain from this that Shelley regarded himself as a monster in the eyes of society. In spite of this, however, he retained his youthful commitment:

Perhaps I should have shrunk from persisting in the task which I had undertaken in early life, of opposing myself, in these evil times & among these evil tongues, to what I esteem misery & vice; if I must have lived in the solitude of the heart. Fortunately my domestic circle incloses that within it which compensates for the loss.⁵¹⁴

Shelley's vision began as a young man, and he enacted it wholeheartedly; thus, it is both personal and literary. The early novels are particularly important in this regard. Shelley's tendency to double or invert his characters, coupled with his own identification with a monstrous being, means that Shelley shares some sympathetic leanings towards Count Cenci. It must be stressed that asserting this does not mean that Shelley condoned a father raping his daughter, or wanton murder; on the contrary, the Cenci's actions are being used to "startle the reader out of sense", as Shelley expressed in the preface to *Laon and Cythna*. Even there, where consensual incest between siblings is delineated, most critics see it purely as a trope, not as Shelley advocating such a practice. The action of *The Cenci* can be

⁵¹⁰ Brown, *Sexuality*, 95.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 95-96.

⁵¹² Shelley to Leigh Hunt, Marlow, 8 December 1816, 1:517.

⁵¹³ Shelley to Thomas Love Peacock, Rome, 6 April 1819, 2:94.

⁵¹⁴ Shelley to Leigh Hunt, Marlow, 8 December 1816, 1:517-518.

seen in the same way, as a means of exploring a human being's relationship to society. Both Beatrice and the Count have to grapple with the question of how far they can go before being branded as depraved. This is why Beatrice stresses to Bernardo, who will be the only survivor of the family:

One thing more, my child,
 For thine own sake be constant to the love
 Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
 Though wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
 Lived ever holy and unstained. And though
 Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name
 Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow
 For men to point at as they pass, do thou
 Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
 Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves. (Act V, Scene iv, ll 145-154)

Although Beatrice seeks to lessen the blow for Bernardo, the essence of the problem, as a result of her action of parricide, has fulfilled the Cenci's desire to leave a legacy of "my name; / Which shall be an inheritance to strip / Its wearer bare as infamy" (Act IV, Scene i, ll 60-62). This demonstrates another way that Cenci and Beatrice are linked.

As in *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley brings in the issue of cannibalism along with the problem of incest. In Act I, Scene iii, Count Cenci pours wine at the banquet and says, "Could I believe thou wert their [his sons'] mingled blood, / Then would I taste thee like a sacrament" (Act I, Scene iii, ll 81-82). As the scene ends, he again pours a goblet, this time of Greek wine, and recites, "As if thou wert indeed my children's blood / Which I did thirst to drink" (Act I, Scene iii, ll 176-177). Conklin notes that cannibalism is a difficult topic to write about because it is "one of the last real taboos in contemporary cosmopolitan society". Even experts can become blinded by their own cultural values when examining it, "for it pushes the limits of cultural relativism, challenging one to define what is or is not beyond the pale of acceptable human behavior."⁵¹⁵ Montaigne, in his essay on cannibalism, is upset at how in judging the faults of others, "we should be so blind to our own". He mentions differing concepts of marriage in another culture, including a man having several wives. Montaigne notes that the women of this other culture were not jealous of their husbands' friendship with other women, something that European women "will claim is a miracle. It is not."⁵¹⁶ Shelley, as Montaigne before him, is combining two extremely powerful concepts with the intent of challenging the status quo. He is exploring cultural relativism in his poetics and one could also say in his life.

Further confounding the problem is the fact that Shelley has built in incestuous overtones between Bernardo and Beatrice, and to a lesser extent, Beatrice and Giacomo. Beatrice and Giacomo kiss to seal the pact of their father's death; she says, "yet kiss me; I shall know / That then thou has consented to his death" (Act III, Scene i, ll 385-386). In Act V, Scene iii, when Bernardo and Beatrice must part, she says, "O, tear him not away!" (Act V, Scene iii, l 93). Then Bernardo (*embracing Beatrice* according to the stage directions), laments, "Oh! would ye divide / Body from soul?" (Act V, Scene iii, l

⁵¹⁵ Conklin, *Consuming Grief*, 3.

⁵¹⁶ Montaigne, *Essays*, 113, 117.

94). When they must part for the last time, Bernardo gives his longest soliloquy (he gives only one other in the entire play, but it is shorter, occurring a little earlier in Act V), and the language is reminiscent of that between Romeo and Juliet, evoking a tragic, romantic love. The sacrilegiousness of Cenci's rape against his daughter is easily recognizable, because it is violent, nonconsensual, and a father is supposed to protect his daughter, not harm her. On the other hand, gentle and devoted sibling incest is more difficult to condemn, because neither is in a position of authority over the other and they choose to do it willingly. The love between Giacomo, Beatrice and Bernardo can be viewed as purely platonic sibling love, or it can be taken further. Shelley has made that ambiguous, but that he built it in at all is relevant, in this *magnum opus* about incest, and shows his resistance to affirming a hard and fast definition of appropriateness.

Before moving on and applying these ideas to *The Cenci*, there is one additional matter which needs to be mentioned, and that is homosexuality. Crompton and Brown find that although Shelley "exalted the romance of same-sex love, he still shared many of the prejudices of Regency England with respect to physical relations". Crompton cites Shelley's preface to *The Cenci*, in which "Shelley calls Count Cenci's homosexual acts 'capital crimes of the most enormous and unspeakable kind.'"⁵¹⁷ The novels offer new data and a fresh perspective. For example, in *Zastrozzi*, there is a flirtatious quality in the interaction between Ugo and Verezzi. After Verezzi escapes, he climbs up a pine tree to rest, with Zastrozzi, Ugo and Bernardo in hot pursuit. They pause right under the tree where Verezzi is hiding. Zastrozzi is keen to proceed immediately, but Ugo counters:

"Signor," said Ugo, "let us the rather stop here to refresh ourselves and our horses. You, perhaps, will not make this pine your couch, but I will get up, for I think I spy an excellent bed above there."

"No, no," answered Zastrozzi; "did not I resolve never to rest until I had found Verezzi? Mount, villain, or die."

Ugo sullenly obeyed. They galloped off, and were quickly out of sight.

Verezzi returned thanks to Heaven for his escape; for he thought that Ugo's eye, as the villain pointed to the branch where he reposed, met his (pp 15-16).

This incident displays Shelley's incorporation of suggestive wordplay between two males who are of different social backgrounds. (Ugo has an "awkward ruffian-like gait" (p 14), while Verezzi is a baron.) First, Ugo wants to "get up" which could be interpreted as a sexually suggestive reference, and then he spies "an excellent bed above there," confirming the first allusion. In addition, Ugo apparently sees Verezzi, the object of the search, but he protects Verezzi from detection, defying Zastrozzi. This is a sign of affection and concern, which also introduces an element irony into the situation, because Ugo and the reader are aware of something that Zastrozzi is not. Viewed from a broader perspective, the power of human kindness, especially that which is not part of traditional marriage (and this includes Shelley's use of incest), can overcome evil. This is significant, indicating that Shelley's attitude toward homosexuality was more lenient than Crompton or Brown realized, but that he curbed his output on this matter in letters and essays because he was already vilified and viewed as a 'worm'.

⁵¹⁷ Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, 294-295; Brown, *Sexuality*, 117.

V

Having laid the foundation, it is now time to postulate about Shelley's aim for this play in light of his early novels, and his overall goals in his life and work. If it can be safely claimed that Shelley was a radical, and that he was pushing the bounds of cultural relativism in his work by employing issues such as incest and cannibalism, and that he himself was viewed as an outcast who was severely punished by society for his errant ways, a new perspective of this play comes into view. It must again be stressed that this is not to condone any type of violent or nonconsensual sexual interaction, nor any violence whatsoever. These are figures of speech which Shelley is using to point out hypocrisy, injustice, economic disparity, and excessive male power, the *patria potestas*, or patriarchal conception of the family in Roman society, which Shelley expands to include British society and a wide array of social systems.⁵¹⁸

One of Shelley's major difficulties with the paternalistic society is the rigid identity that it imposes upon both men and women in terms of their sexuality, as well as their behavior in general. Cenci represents the male side of the paternalistic equation, while Beatrice represents the female side. Cenci is portrayed with noble attributes, he is not a perverted man; it is society, which has given him excessive power by birthright, that Shelley is attacking. Swinburne points this out with alacrity, "Cenci, as we see him, is the full-blown flower, the accomplished result of a life absolute in its luck, in power and success and energetic enjoyment. . . . What he is good fortune has made him."⁵¹⁹ Cenci's abuse of the *patria potestas* is his way of fighting against it as a system; he does not have a personal vendetta against Beatrice, anymore than he did against his two sons, Cristofano and Rocco. Rocco was killed by a church, which collapsed upon him at mass, and Cristofano was murdered by a jealous lover, but he was the wrong man (Act I, Scene iii, ll 58-65). These 'killings' by a church and by a jealous man represent Count Cenci's (and Shelley's) desire to remake society by ridding it of the religious, political, and social institutions which are holding it together.

Beatrice is a victim to the Count because of the way in which society has defined her role as a daughter, a female and a young woman. Her entire identity is wrapped up in her honor, which is principally viewed as her virginity. She needs to protect that at all costs; Cenci decides it is his to take as he pleases. If her virginity were not the defining feature of her goodness, and if Cenci were not granted exclusive power over her fate and that of his family, they would both be free to find the balance Mary Wollstonecraft speaks about so eloquently. They are each trapped by society, and their own traits and frustrations magnify this. This is Shelley's way of exposing flaws in the system, rather than of expressing personal militancy on the Count's, or later, on Beatrice's part. If surveyed from the broad perspective of a destruction of the old social order, seeking Beatrice's consent in the matter is important, because she is half of the equation. Women must be willing to adapt and be flexible in order for social change to be effective.

⁵¹⁸ Woodberry, xiv.

⁵¹⁹ Swinburne, quoted in Woodberry, 128n33.

In addition, in traditional Roman society (and in other societies too), the father felt an obligation to preserve and protect his daughter's virginity, which Shelley has turned upside down. A father had the power to marry his daughter, as can be seen from *Romeo and Juliet*. A great deal of the suffering in that play occurs because Juliet's father will not listen to her objections, and her mother reinforces that. Cenci in a sense is marrying Beatrice, but he is marrying her to himself, having collapsed the role of father and bridegroom into one. The audience is outraged at Beatrice's situation, but this demonstrates a *coup de maître* on Shelley's part, for countless young women, including Shakespeare's fictional Juliet Capulet and Julius Caesar's daughter, Julia, whom Caesar betrothed to Pompey in order to solidify his hold on power, had to consent to marriages in which they had no say. (In Julia's case, she learned to love Pompey and he too became devoted to her.) These young women were expected by society and the church to agree to have sexual intercourse with men not of their choosing and for life, often when they were in love with someone else, as in Juliet's case.

Moreover, aristocratic and royal families chose husbands for their daughters so as to boost up their social standing. This happened to young men as well, for it happened to the Marquis de Sade. He possessed the value of an old family name, being the "descendant of the chaste Laure de Noves, wife of Paul de Sade, whom she married in 1325. Famous for her beauty, she was the 'Laura' of Petrarch's Sonnets."⁵²⁰ Sade's wife's family was *nouveau riche*, and so the two sets of parents arranged the union for their benefit. Thus, while Count Cenci's desire for Beatrice's consent is shocking at first, by changing only one factor, father and groom, it reveals the corruption of soul (as Shelley is implying) which so many families demanded of their daughters; a corruption exacted by the social order. Unlike the parents Shelley is contrasting him with, Cenci is not greedy nor does he have a lust for power. The Count's destruction of his entire family is a symbolic attack on the patriarchal society, not an attempt to violate Beatrice's or any woman's honor.

Shelley manifests this symbolism in various ways throughout the play, one of which is humor. For example, in Act III, Scene i, Giacomo and Orsino are engaged in conversation with one another. Orsino is the one speaking when Beatrice enters, and says, "'Tis my brother's voice! You know me not?" (Act III, Scene i, l 380), to which Giacomo replies, "My sister, my lost sister! (l 381). Beatrice then retorts, "Lost indeed!" (l 381). This passage is fascinating for several reasons. First of all, Beatrice hears Orsino's voice, whom she knows well, but she indicates it is her brother's voice. Then, Giacomo answers. This demonstrates the nature of the doubling between Giacomo and Orsino. In addition, the question she poses, "You know me not?" is important, because it is after the rape. Does her brother recognize her, now that she has lost the defining feature of her identity? Giacomo understands this, and labels her as "lost". She is not one to miss a beat, however, and rebuffs that quickly, with "lost indeed". All of this is a parody on the social order, and what it defines as normal. This play can be seen to be a manifestation of the grotesque, which dallies with issues of disharmony, the comic and the terrifying, extravagance and exaggeration, and abnormality. There can be a satiric and playful element to it, including aspects of the absurd, the bizarre, the macabre, and caricature:

⁵²⁰ Jean Paulhan, "The Marquis de Sade and His Accomplice," in *The Marquis de Sade: Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and other writings*, tr. Richard Seaver & Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 7, 7n2.

Because of the characteristic *impact* of the grotesque, the sudden shock which it causes, the grotesque is often used as an aggressive weapon. . . .The shock-effect of the grotesque may also be used to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective. . . . This effect of the grotesque can best be summed up as *alienation*.⁵²¹

In addition, armed with knowledge of the novels, at points *The Cenci* is funny when perhaps it shouldn't be. These points are rare, but they do occur. For example, in Act III, Scene ii, Giacomo and Orsino are discussing the Cenci's fate, and Giacomo resolves to kill him. Then he says, "Shall I wait, Orsino, / Till he return, and stab him at the door?" (ll 373-374). If one knows the novels, Verezzi's escape scene and struggle with Bernardo which Shelley enacts with such hilarity in *Zastrozzi* comes to mind. One could say Giacomo's lines pose as a Gothic intruder bursting in upon Shelley's high drama. Shelley is cleverly poking fun at his own novels, a burlesquing of both himself and the wider issues:

With the exception of Byron, the major Romantic poets are not often associated with the comic or with satire. . . . Yet Shelley's own self-criticism suggests a capacity for irony and self-mockery which immediately exonerates him from the charge of seriousness which he brings against his own lightly disguised poetic persona in *Julian and Maddalo*. He was also acutely aware of the uses of laughter and seems to have distinguished between its several varieties and purposes. This concern and this tendency in Shelley can be detected in his poetry which exhibits an ambivalence towards laughter that has never been fully recognized.⁵²²

Shelley was not one to lightly make fun of the human condition purely for the sake of laughter; he despised the way that "Society grinds poor wretches into the dust of abject poverty, till they are scarcely recognizable as human beings; and then, instead of being treated as what they really are, subjects of the deepest pity, they are brought forward as grotesque monstrosities to be laughed at."⁵²³ Instead, he aimed the tool of satire where he felt it belonged, at the evils of society, which he hoped to strike with a bull's eye. This is a quality he employs acutely and without reserve in *The Cenci*.

Steven E. Jones offers helpful insight in his discussion of *The Devil's Walk*, written in 1812, when Shelley was only twenty, by noting that the "Devil, 'the prince of liars and imposters,' belongs in satire."⁵²⁴

Shelley's Devil gets dressed for his tour by disguising his identity beneath the lies of banal fashion, but he does so as a matter of course, with absolutely no sense of ceremony, no sublime diabolical mystery.

He drew on a boot to hide his hoof,

⁵²¹ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 58-9.

⁵²² Timothy Webb, "Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter," in *Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 43.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵²⁴ Steven E. Jones, *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), 43.

He drew on a glove to hide his claw,
 His horns were concealed by a Bras Chapeau,
 And the Devil went forth as natty a Beau
 As Bond-Street ever saw. (II 5-9)

This . . . suggests that *all* quotidian social customs and manners, especially those tied to class distinctions, conceal evil. Deception is the norm.⁵²⁵

One character, Orsino, is debonair, clever and urbane, but also cruel, manifesting evil; however, in some sense, Orsino is Everyman and Everywoman. His behavior demonstrates how each person helps to uphold the customs of society. By encouraging individuals to break free from the control which is being exerted upon them, a new social order can emerge. Shelley would seem to be saying that individuals in all walks of life have a great deal more power than is acknowledged. Moreover, the paternalistic society, as represented by Cenci and Beatrice, requires the cooperation of both of them to stay afloat. Cenci alone cannot do it, as he freely admitted: “Well—well— / I must give up the greater point, which was / To poison and corrupt her soul” (Act IV, Scene i, ll 43-45). Much of Cenci’s actions were designed to fight the paternalistic society by destroying his family, which is another way to read the play, while Beatrice, in the end, dies trying to save it. Shelley has completely switched their roles.



Orpheus by Rodin
 National Museum of Western Art
 Tokyo, Japan, 1908

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

VI

In many of Shelley's works there is a trial scene. In *St. Irvyne*, where there is no trial scene, the question of a human being's relationship to the universe and the matter of divine justice or damnation are paramount. In *Zastrozzi*, at the end of the novel Matilda is arrested by il consiglio di dieci, and she is thrust into the exact same type of situation which Verezzi endured at the opening of the novel (pp 91-92). She is soon taken into the court, and like Jesus Christ, she will not answer when pressed three times as to her crime. Verezzi can also be seen as a Christ-like figure. Then, in language that Shelley will use again in *The Cenci*, one of the inquisitors says, "You will persist in this foolish obstinacy? . . . Officials, do your duty" (pp 94-95). In *The Cenci*, the line is, "Guards! do your duty," (Act V, Scene iii, l 94). Matilda is then returned to her chamber, where she has a conversion dream. She finds peace, a peace which has eluded her throughout the novel, and then Shelley explains, "No longer did that agony of despair torture her bosom. True, she was ill at ease," (p 97), which in the context is funny because he is not allowing the fact of her conversion to completely free her from the consequences of her deeds. But Shelley immediately moves into a more serious assessment of the situation, for he explains that "remorse for her crimes deeply affected her; . . . the heavy sighs which burst from her bosom, showed that the arrows of repentance had penetrated deeply" (p 97). The culmination of *Zastrozzi* is both Matilda's and Zastrozzi's trial scene, replete with a witness, Ferdinand Zeilnitz, who proclaims Matilda's innocence, and the appearance of Julia's mutilated body which Matilda is fascinated by and cannot stop gazing upon, as though entranced.

Particularly relevant for *The Cenci* is Zastrozzi's explanation of his conduct which has at last led to him being tried in court:

"The father of him, who, by my arts committed suicide but six days ago in La Contessa di Laurentini' mansion, took advantage of a moment of weakness, and disgraced her who bore me. He swore, with the most sacred oaths, to marry her—but he was false.

"My mother soon brought me into the world—the seducer married another; and, when the destitute Olivia begged a pittance to keep her from starving, her proud betrayer spurned her from his door, and tauntingly bade her exercise her profession—'The crime I committed with thee, perjured one!' exclaimed my mother, as she left his door, 'shall be my last!'—and, by heavens! She acted nobly. A victim to falsehood, she sank early to the tomb; and, ere her thirtieth year, she died—her spotless soul fled to eternal happiness. Never shall I forget—though but fourteen when she died—never shall I forget her last commands. 'My son,' said she, 'my Pietrino, revenge my wrongs—revenge them on the perjured Verezzi—revenge them on his progeny for ever!' (pp 101-102).

This description contains the essence of society's wrongs which Shelley is fighting against. Olivia, only sixteen at the time, loses her honor and her virginity, becomes pregnant, and is then told to support herself through prostitution. She is a victim of perjury, and pays the price with her life and her sufferings. She demands revenge, and Zastrozzi fulfills her wish. All of these themes haunt Shelley's work. In a sense, Olivia's wish to destroy Verezzi's family (her son's relations though he is illegitimate), presages the Cenci's to destroy his. After Zastrozzi speaks the truth at the trial, he is placed on the rack and dies.

What is interesting about this is that Matilda brutally murdered Julia and is on trial for that, but Zastrozzi did not murder Verezzi, he committed suicide, yet Zastrozzi is on trial. It is true that Zastrozzi murdered their father, but that was some years previously, and he was not caught for that, nor is he on trial for it. Both Beatrice and Zastrozzi commit parricide, a crime for which she is punished but he is not. Shelley's conception of justice, and his attitude toward suicide and who or what is to blame for it, deserve examination. Franz Kafka's *The Trial* comes to mind, along with Kafka's "mysterious courts of justice" and his "obstinate strangeness which is the expression of his sense of the ambiguity of everything: ships and offices and hotels, as in the present book [*America*], or good and evil, justice and mercy, as in all his books."⁵²⁶

In the trial of *The Cenci*, at first Marzio tells the whole truth simply and clearly (Act V, Scene ii, ll 14-19). Then Beatrice enters and begins lying. At last, both from her words and her eyes (the power of her gaze is like the Medusa's) Marzio offers a false confession. Then Marzio dies by suicide, holding his breath on the rack, with Beatrice commenting, "What is his poor life? / What are a thousand lives? A parricide / Had trampled them like dust; and see, he lives!" (Act V, Scene ii, ll 105-107), but of course, this is sarcastic, because she is "trampling him like dust," and "his poor life" is nothing to her. Lucretia and Giacomo urge her to tell the truth, as does young Bernardo, "If indeed / It can be true, say so, dear sister mine; / And then the Pope will surely pardon you, / And all be well" (Act V, Scene iii, ll 57-59). She does not follow their advice. Unlike Zastrozzi, who confesses, Beatrice is convicted without a confession. Giacomo also confesses, and then repents, "O weak, wicked tongue, / Which hast destroyed me" (Act V, Scene iii, ll 97-98). It is his words and not his deed which he regrets, bringing in the issue of slander. (Notably, Zastrozzi does not repent of his confession, nor of his deed.) One gets the sense that the truth in Shelley is difficult to arrive at (as it later would be for Faulkner, where the facts do not tell the whole story), because human motives obscure their speech. The whole question of speech acts is an important one that emerges significantly in the trial scenes. If the novels were an adamant thread connecting themselves to *Laon and Cythna*, they are an anchor to *The Cenci*.

⁵²⁶ Edwin Muir, introduction to *America* in *The Penguin Complete Novels of Franz Kafka* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1983), 437.

Lyric Interlude III

'Orpheus'

There is a lyric fragment entitled 'Orpheus', a name coined by Robert Garnett when he located this unpublished piece in one of the notebooks and published it for the first time in *Relics of Shelley* in 1862. His analysis led him to attribute this piece to Shelley at that time, though later he became less sure, and authorship has become clouded.⁵²⁷ This is discussed in detail in the *Works of Mary Shelley*, one place where this fragment can be found.⁵²⁸ In the 1905 Oxford edition of Shelley's poetry, 'Orpheus' appears as a poem written in 1820 by Shelley.⁵²⁹ The new Johns Hopkins series has been released in only the first two volumes, which do not encompass the year 1820, so it is too soon to say whether or not it will be included. Volume Three of the Longman series (2011) covers the years 1819-1820, but 'Orpheus' does not appear, nor is there any explanatory note. All of the other poems which Shelley wrote on this theme for inclusion in Mary Shelley's dramas on Midas and Proserpine are in Volume Three, in addition to one more fragment. I offer this interlude in defense of Shelley's authorship.

I

Shelley begins *in medias res*, a strategy that he also uses to open *Zastrozzi* and *The Cenci*, with similar effect. It immediately draws the reader in to the action and grips one's attention.

- A. Not far from hence. From yonder pointed hill
 Crowned with a ring of oaks you may behold
 A dark and barren field, through which there flows
 Sluggish & black a deep but narrow stream
 Which the wind ripples not, and the fair moon
 Gazes in vain & finds no mirror there. –
 Follow the herbless banks of that strange brook
 Until you pause beside a darksome pond
 The fountain of this rivulet – whose gush
 Cannot be seen, hid by a rayless night
 That lives beneath the overhanging rock
 And shades the pool – an endless spring of gloom. (ll 1-12)

These lines are a description of the entrance to Hades or Hell. This can be ascertained because Orpheus went down to Hades to rescue Eurydice, his wife, and in the Orphic Hymn to Pluto a similar location is described:

In the Tartarian plains remote from fight,
 And wrapt forever in the depths of night; . . . (ll 3-4)

To thee, great king, Avernus is assign'd,

⁵²⁷ *Relics of Shelley*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Edward Moxon, 1862), 20-25.

⁵²⁸ *Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Pamela Clemit, vol. 2 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996), 442-445.

⁵²⁹ *CPW*, 628-630.

The seat of Gods, and basis of mankind.
 Thy throne is fix'd in Hade's dismal plains,
 Distant, unknown to rest, where darkness reigns;
 Where, destitute of breath, pale specters dwell
 In endless, dire, inexorable hell;
 And in dread Acheron, whose depths obscure,
 Earth's stable roots eternally secure. (ll 11-18)⁵³⁰

Shelley himself had translated some of the Homeric Hymns, and Thomas Taylor's translation of the Orphic Hymns was completed in 1792, a work with which Shelley could have been familiar.

This poem is a dialogue spoken between a character named 'A', who yearns to sing like Orpheus, and a chorus. The chorus reminds one of a Greek tragedy, setting the tone, but 'A' is not identified. At first, 'A' describes Orpheus in the third person, and then switches to first person (l 85), when explaining:

I talk of moon, and wind, and stars, and not
 Of song; but, would I echo his high song,
 Nature must lend me words ne'er used before,
 Or I must borrow from her perfect works,
 To picture forth his perfect attributes. (ll 98-102)

'A' then returns to the third person and describes Orpheus in his bower in the underworld, with the spot where he sits being exquisitely lovely, peaceful, quiet, and magical.

II

An important feature of 'Orpheus' and of the novels is mist. Here is a descriptive sequence from *Zastrozzi*:

The evening at last arrived; the atmosphere was obscured by vapour, and the air more chill than usual; yet, yielding to the solicitations of Matilda, Verezzi accompanied her to the forest (p 68).

These vapors occur more than once in *Zastrozzi*, and contain significance in terms of the action. For example, in Chapter IV, Matilda and Zastrozzi go to a dungeon in which she has imprisoned Paulo, Julia's servant, and on their way, "The lamp, obscured by the vapours, burnt dimly as they advanced" (p 23). Shortly after this, Zastrozzi poisons Paulo, he indicates that he will also poison Julia, and then he and Matilda walk out into the forest for a private discussion:

Whilst thus they conversed, whilst they planned these horrid schemes of destruction, the night wore away.

The moon-beam darting her oblique rays from under volumes of lowering vapour, threatened an approaching storm. The lurid sky was tinged with a yellowish luster – the forest-tops rustled in the rising tempest – big drops fell – a flash of lightning, and, instantly after, a peal of bursting thunder, struck with sudden terror

⁵³⁰ *The Hymns of Orpheus*, trans. Thomas Taylor (London: B. White and Son, 1792), "Hymn to Pluto." URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hoo/index.htm> (accessed 23 August 2011).

the bosom of Matilda. She, however, immediately overcame it, and, regarding the battling element with indifference, continued her discourse with Zastrozzi (p 24).

Thus, the vapors seem to be an evil omen. This is found in *The Cenci* in words spoken by Beatrice just before the plot to murder her father is finalized, “What is this undistinguishable mist, / Of thoughts, which arise, like shadow after shadow, / Darkening each other?” (Act III, Scene i, ll 170-172). This is further developed by Shelley in ‘Orpheus’ with specific reference to a cave:

On one side of this jagged and shapeless hill
There is a cave, from which there eddies up
A pale mist, like aëreal gossamer,
Whose breath destroys all life – awhile it veils
The rock – then, scattered by the wind, it flies
Along the stream, or lingers on the clefts,
Killing the sleepy worms, if aught bide there. (ll 18-24)

Pluto kept Proserpine in a cave:

There, in a wond’rous cave obscure and deep,
The sacred maid secure from search you keep,
The cave of Atthis, whose wide gates display
An entrance to the kingdoms void of day. (ll 25-28)⁵³¹

Mephitic vapors are particularly associated with places where one can descend into the underworld, such as Avernus in Italy (as seen in the Orphic Hymn to Pluto quoted above), and with the goddess Hecate, who had chthonic aspects and was adept at poisons. It thus makes sense that the chorus could hear Orpheus’ song when they were near the entrance to the underworld in the opening section of the poem. It is also noteworthy that Alastor is the name of one of the four black steeds which pulled the chariot on the day that Pluto abducted Proserpine.⁵³²

III

Rieger explains that Orpheus, in this “dramatic lyric” is a healer, for “Orpheus’ song, by purging his grief, renews the natural world, which falls silent with love. The trees and animals crowd in to hear him, and the wind resumes its normal neutrality (as regards the immediate felicity of man)”. This “music of the spheres”, attached by Rieger to occult learning, in particular that of Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus, is an essential element of the poem.⁵³³ The power of music plays a role in *Zastrozzi* as well, for Matilda seduced Verezzi with music:

“Suffer me to retire for a few minutes,” said Matilda.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Claudian, *The Rape of Proserpine*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Loeb Classical Library, 1922), http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Claudian/De_Raptu_Proserpinae/1*.html p. 315 (accessed 23 August 2011).

⁵³³ Rieger, *Mutiny*, 172-175.

Without waiting for Verezzi's answer, she hastily entered a small tuft of trees. Verezzi gazed surprised; and soon sounds of such ravishing melody stole upon the evening breeze, that Verezzi thought some spirit of the solitude had made audible to mortal ears ethereal music.

He still listened – it seemed to die away – and again a louder, a more rapturous swell, succeeded.

The music was in unison with the scene – it was in unison with Verezzi's soul; and the success of Matilda's artifice, in this respect, exceeded her most sanguine expectation.

He still listened – the music ceased – and Matilda's symmetrical form emerging from the wood, roused Verezzi from his vision.

He gazed on her – her loveliness and grace struck forcibly upon his senses; her sensibility, her admiration of objects which enchanted him, flattered him; and her judicious arrangement of the music left no doubt in his mind but that, experiencing the same sensations herself, the feelings of his soul were not unknown to her (p 59).

Throughout the novel Matilda has played music for Verezzi, and has been lovely and graceful in her own passionate way, but he has not fallen in love with her; he has remained devoted to his beloved Julia. This time, however, the music seems to be carried on the wind, as it is in the poem, and something changes; after she emerges from the grove, he sees her in a new light, as though entranced. The power of the music has transformed his feelings. This resonates with Orpheus' power:

Chorus. What wondrous sound is that, mournful and faint,
But more melodious than the murmuring wind
Which through the columns of a temple glides?
A. It is the wandering voice of Orpheus' lyre,
Borne by the winds, who sigh that their rude king
Hurries them fast from these air-feeding notes;
But in their speed they bear along with them
The waning sound, scattering it like dew
Upon the startled sense. (ll 35-43)

IV

After describing an idyllic musical interlude with Eurydice by Orpheus' side (ll 56-66), 'A' notes "But that is past" (l 67) and continues:

Returning from the drear Hell
He chose a lonely seat of unhewn stone,
Blackened with lichens, on a herbless plain,
Then from the deep and overflowing spring
Of his eternal ever-moving grief
There rose to heaven a sound of angry song.
'Tis as a mighty cataract that parts
Two sister rocks with waters swift and strong
And casts itself with horrid roar and din

Adown a steep; from a perennial source
 It ever flows and falls, and breaks the air
 With loud and fierce, but most harmonious roar
 And as it falls casts up a vaporous spray
 Which the sun clothes in hues of Iris light. (ll 67-80)

This passage of unsurpassed lyric mastery is describing the interior state of Orpheus's mind, which mirrors the exterior location. The language which describes the water falling literally seems to fall: "with waters swift and strong, / And casts itself with horrid roar and din / Adown a steep; from a perennial source / It ever flows and falls". This echoes the first stanza of the poem 'Arethusa', which was written at approximately the same time, linking the two together thematically. Arethusa "leapt down the rocks / With her rainbow locks" while in 'Orpheus' the water "casts up a vaporous spray / Which the sun clothes in hues of Iris light", with Iris signifying the rainbow. The poem of 'Arethusa' involves a flight in terror followed by a blissful union, but the meaning behind this is not articulated directly, it needs to be inferred according to the impression of the reader. In 'Orpheus', on the other hand, Shelley explicitly states what is happening. From his grief, "a sound of angry song" arises, which is like water and the sound of a cataract, embodying Arethusa because as a water nymph, she herself is water. (The word 'cataract' also appears in the first quote from *Zastrozzi*.) Though the sound of the water falling is "loud and fierce", the roar it produces is "most harmonious," which echoes the fourth and final stanza of 'Arethusa', a model of harmony. Orpheus has been immersed in Arethusa's waters as was Alpheus. The interlinking of these two poems and their characters is complex, indicating a complementarity between them. 'Orpheus' then moves on to describe "poesy": "Thus the tempestuous torrent of his grief / Is clothed in sweetest sounds and varying words / Of poesy" (ll 81-83). This is a subject dear to Shelley's heart and one that he elaborates upon more than once. The poem concludes with a description of the silence of the spheres while all of the creatures listen to Orpheus's music, and yet there is a hint of the presence of death at the same time, a feature which also makes its way into the end of 'Arethusa', *Laon and Cythna* and others of his works.

As was noted at the beginning of this analysis, 'Orpheus' contains a character, 'A', who tells most of the story, and who seems to know the way to where they are going, and a chorus which asks two questions – 'What is that noise? And does he still sing?' There are hints that 'A' is Alpheus himself (or possibly Arethusa herself), for 'A' mentions, "As I have seen / A fierce south blast tear through the darkened sky" (ll 87-88), an event which Alpheus precipitated in the second stanza of 'Arethusa' (ll 25-30). Moreover, Arethusa is a muse of poetry, Alpheus pursued her relentlessly, and 'A' is trying to imitate "his [Orpheus'] high song" in words. This possibility provides another stunning connection to 'Arethusa arose', and it goes without saying that behind 'A' is Shelley himself. The 'Hymns of Apollo and Pan', two additional poems in this mythological series, deal with a singing contest, and the final lines of 'Orpheus' deal with one too: "Not even the nightingale intrudes a note / In rivalry, but all entranced she listens" (ll 123-124), offering closure to this set of poems.

Chapter 4 – *Prometheus Unbound*

Prometheus Unbound, according to Pottle, is generally recognized as a myth, and thus “is capable of endless allegorization.”⁵³⁴ Sperry finds that “*Prometheus Unbound* has been most often read, and increasingly so in recent years, as the elaboration of a philosophical system prefigured in Shelley’s earlier letters, essays, and poems like ‘Mont Blanc’.”⁵³⁵ As such, he notes that “scholars generally have tended to minimize the broadly lyrical character and purpose of his play.”⁵³⁶ Sperry himself classifies it “with the possible exception of some of Blake’s prophecies, the most ambitious attempt at visionary creation in literature, even in the light of Dante and Milton.”⁵³⁷ That is a sweeping statement, one that urges “the primacy of the psychological, imaginative, and transformational elements in Shelley’s work, because they point to what is both most innovative and difficult in it. The play throughout reverberates with such questions as ‘Canst thou speak?’ ‘Hast thou beheld?’ ‘Hearest thou not?’ ‘Feelest thou not?’ — questions that betray a continual struggle for a revisualization of reality”.⁵³⁸

In earlier chapters, it has been observed that Shelley is conscientious in bringing references from the novels into his later works, and that there is a continuity running through his compositions. This is similar to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels, which are, according to Jacques Cabau, “Loaded with murders, with rapes, with tortures, with castrations, with incest, with curses, with suicides, with madness, the world of Faulkner is that of the Gothic novel”. These Yoknapatawpha County novels are “an interrelated series”, for Faulkner’s goals “were rarely achieved in a single novel”; instead there is a “comprehensive but irregular scheme which connects” them, though it “demands much of the reader [who must] work out his own synthesis of the many characters and events and determine what the unifying elements are beneath the multiplicity; the Gothic strand is only one of many.”⁵³⁹

Murphy notes that “More explicitly than any other work, *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-1819) indicates the process whereby Gothic elements disappear.”⁵⁴⁰ Before Prometheus revokes the curse which he had placed upon Jupiter, he is “a very different character from that in the remainder of the drama”, for he “embodies all the attributes of the Gothic hero-villain . . . [his] haggard external form is accompanied by the pose of defiance; . . . he is filled with doubt, gloom, and melancholy; an isolated figure”; after the revocation, which occurs early in the first act, however, “Prometheus completely loses his villainous Gothic characteristics and is transmuted into a noble hero.”⁵⁴¹ Considering Shelley’s tendency to write across texts, it seems wise to carefully consider what *Prometheus Unbound* has to offer in relation to *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. This analysis will proceed as have the previous chapters, though, as with *The Cenci*, from a slightly broader perspective.

⁵³⁴ Frederick A. Pottle, “The Role of Asia in the Dramatic Action of Shelley’s ‘Prometheus Unbound’”, in *Shelley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 133.

⁵³⁵ Sperry, *Verse*, 69.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵³⁹ Elizabeth M. Kerr, *William Faulkner’s Gothic Domain* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979), 1, 240-244.

⁵⁴⁰ *Angel*, 146.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

I

Prometheus Unbound is a lyrical drama in four acts. This means that it was not intended to be performed on the stage, but that it could and should be read aloud. That the lines to be spoken by the cast possess a power and a beauty to move the audience was essential to Shelley; he carefully crafts dramatic tension which interweaves with a musical quality. The result is an operatic play of quite a different ambience than that of *The Cenci*, perhaps as Mozart is to Wagner, so to speak, indicating that Wasserman's and Curran's sense that these two pieces (*The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*) should be read in opposition to one another is valid.⁵⁴² As with some other works, Shelley places a Latin epigraph directly under the title, "AUDISNE HAEC AMPHIARAE, SUB TERRAM ADBITE?" This happens to be from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, Book 2, *On Bearing Pain*, and occurs relatively late in the disputation (Section XXVI), when two philosophers are discussing whether or not pain is evil. The first, Dionysius of Heraclea, who spent many years studying philosophy, realizes that in spite of this, he cannot bear the pain from his kidney disease and therefore concludes it is an evil. Cleanthes, the second philosopher in the discussion, "then is said, striking the ground with his foot, to have repeated the verse from the Epigoni [of Æschylus] [and this is the quote Shelley uses]:

"Among the dead hear'st thou this, Amphiarus?"⁵⁴³

Although associating pain with Prometheus is perhaps an overly obvious choice, Shelley brings in the issue of evil, not only in relation to his pain but also in relation to philosophy, in a complex manner.

Duffy sees this quote, as does Wasserman, in terms of the stoic suffering that Cicero develops in this particular disputation; a stoicism which Shelley ascribes to his Prometheus. Wasserman finds that Shelley turns this quote "back on its own author" with "considerable irony."⁵⁴⁴ That is true but is a bit strong. Shelley did the same thing with Wollstonecraft and Godwin, and possibly Byron too in terms of the paternity of *Allegro*, so this is in fact not solely irony, but respect. That Shelley chose Æschylus as his model served to invigorate Æschylus' work for a new audience and a new era, a fact which has been borne out two centuries later with the new Hollywood blockbuster entitled 'Prometheus'.⁵⁴⁵ Moreover, for one who knows Shelley's novels, the key point in this quote is not Cicero but Amphiarus. Amphiarus appears in Æschylus' *The Seven Against Thebes*, and although not detailed in the play, Amphiarus asked his sons to kill their mother should he not return from the war, which he did not. The thread of a revenge killing of a parent is deeply buried in this quote, but is near the surface in Greek tragedy and Greek mythology, so is important to keep in mind.

The drama is told through the language of poetry, and in *A Defence of Poetry*, written approximately one year later, Shelley spends a great deal of time equating poetry with pleasure, complicating the schema. For example, Shelley states in *A Defence*, "Poetry is ever accompanied with

⁵⁴² Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 84-128; Curran, *Annus Mirabilis*, 120-137.

⁵⁴³ CPW, 204; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Book 2 – *On Bearing Pain*. Source: [Latin Library, Hypertext Latin](http://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/pain.htm) (Perseus); English translation from Andrew P. Peabody, *Cicero's Tusculan Disputations* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1886), 195-250. <http://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/pain.htm> (p. 33-34) (accessed 25 August 2012).

⁵⁴⁴ Duffy, *Sublime*, 150-154; Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 282-283 & 283 n 59 & 60.

⁵⁴⁵ 'Prometheus,' directed by Ridley Scott (Scott Free Productions, 2012), DVD.

pleasure”; “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight”; “Poetry ever communicates all the pleasure which men are capable of receiving; it is ever still the light of life—the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time”; “Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.”⁵⁴⁶ Yet surely Shelley is willing to use excruciating imagery in poems such as ‘Julian and Maddalo’:

‘That you had never seen me—never heard
My voice, and more than all had ne’er endured
The deep pollution of my loathed embrace—
That your eyes ne’er had lied love in my face—
That, like some maniac monk, I had torn out
The nerves of manhood by their bleeding root
With mine own quivering fingers, so that ne’er
Our hearts had for a moment mingled there
To disunite in horror—’ (ll 420-428)⁵⁴⁷

And he employs the grotesque in an unrestrained manner which gradually builds to a crescendo in ‘The Sensitive Plant’. Part Third in particular offers a sharp juxtaposition to the ‘sweetness and light’ of Part Second:

And plants, at whose names the verse feels loath,
Filled the place with a monstrous undergrowth,
Prickly, and pulpous, and blistering, and blue,
Livid, and starred with a lurid dew. (Part Third, ll 58-61)⁵⁴⁸

It would also seem to be quite difficult for anyone familiar with the events of his life to call Shelley the happiest of humans. Toward the end of *A Defence*, Shelley asserts that a poet “ought personally to be the happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of men”, reinforcing his earlier statement.⁵⁴⁹ Behrendt finds that this passage and the section that follows it constitute Shelley’s attempt to “rescue his own reputation, both as poet and as person, by appealing to the tests both of poetic genius and of time.”⁵⁵⁰ Whilst a valid interpretation, it does not preclude the fact that there is a dramatic tension between *A Defence of Poetry* and *Prometheus Unbound*, making *A Defence* helpful in exploring Shelley’s lyric drama in relation to the novels.

⁵⁴⁶ Clark, 281, 283, 286, 294.

⁵⁴⁷ Longman2:655-694.

⁵⁴⁸ *P&P*, 286-295.

⁵⁴⁹ Clark, 295.

⁵⁵⁰ Behrendt, *Audiences*, 237.

II

Although *A Defence of Poetry* will be beneficial to this analysis, it is not always a straightforward document and cannot be taken at face value in all instances. Antinomies are a natural and frequent occurrence in Shelley's work, but this rather startling claim may need some justification before proceeding. Keach observes that "In its unstable and at times paradoxical effort to recognize both the peculiar strengths and the inherent limitations of the verbal medium, the *Defence* provides the fullest, most complex account we have of Shelley's attitude towards language". However, Keach does not specifically address the matter of tone employed by Shelley in the essay, he concentrates instead on an exploration of "the power of language to constitute and rule thought."⁵⁵¹ Behrendt finds *A Defence of Poetry* to be an essay which contains "the least overt rhetorical manipulation of its audience. . . . Shelley had written his *Defence* as a studiously earnest response to Peacock's lighthearted 'The Four Ages of Poetry,' which had appeared in 1820, in the one and only issue of *Ollier's Literary Miscellany*."⁵⁵² Jones concurs when he describes *A Defence of Poetry* as "an earnest exploration of poetry's effect and influence, written as a *countersatiric* response to Peacock—one of the eminent satirists of the age."⁵⁵³ Nevertheless, expressing opinions indirectly or overtly is part of Shelley's style. Two examples can help to demonstrate this.

The first occurs when he explains that:

It was not until the eleventh century that the effects of the poetry of the Christian and chivalric systems began to manifest themselves. . . . The abolition of personal and domestic slavery and the emancipation of women from a great part of the degrading restraints of antiquity were among the consequences of these events.

The abolition of personal slavery is the basis of the highest political hope that it can enter into the mind of man to conceive. The freedom of women produced the poetry of sexual love.⁵⁵⁴

Abolition of slavery did not occur until centuries later, and then only with a great struggle. Moreover, the Atlantic slave trade flourished under the Christian kings of Spain, Portugal, England and other European colonial powers. Ongoing efforts to eradicate slavery in this world continue in the twenty-first century. Yet what Shelley means by "personal and domestic" slavery is another matter, as he felt marriage to be a form of domestic slavery. Nor was the freedom of women manifest in eleventh century or later medieval chivalric code, and in many ways chivalry infused a greater level of formality into male-female relations, something which Mary Wollstonecraft and Shelley (among others) would both rail against, each in his or her own way. Based on the content of the novels and *Queen Mab*, it is clear that Shelley is writing facetiously, though most scholars take him at his word, as can be seen from this example:

⁵⁵¹ Keach, *Style*, 34-40.

⁵⁵² Behrendt, *Audiences*, 235-239.

⁵⁵³ Jones, *Satire*, 146.

⁵⁵⁴ Clark, 288-289.

To come to Shelley's most famous hyperbole: The progress the culture owes to poetry and that poetry in turn partakes in consists in the forging of ever new and better legislation. Shelley's favorite example of how this progress works is the literature of "chivalry" in the Middle Ages, mainly that of Dante, which advanced the condition both of slaves and of women toward equality.⁵⁵⁵

Shelley's statement about the abolition of personal and domestic slavery as a lofty political goal is clearly stated, but his feeling about medieval Christianity and chivalry is far more ambiguous. The poetry of Dante may be a light unto the ages, and may have stimulated positive statutory change down the line, but the way Shelley words this is insufficient to express that, and leaves open the possibility that he is instead pointing out the failure of Christianity, chivalry and poetry to improve the human condition. Shelley's skill in mixing a true and valid statement with more specious ones, though in an unfeigned tone, is a hallmark of his writing.

The second example occurs when he is discussing the writings of certain "reasoners", to use his term, including Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau and their disciples. Shelley notes that they deserve "the gratitude of mankind" for their efforts, but then states:

Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain.⁵⁵⁶

But every human life is important, and progress must begin in the present moment. (Note the similarity of this passage with his earlier rejection of Harriet, "there would, in any case, have been little to regret".) As Shelley stated in the opening of *A Defence*, "the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed."⁵⁵⁷ Therefore, examining Shelley's tone in this passage about the reasoners is necessary. Indeed, he defends them in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound* when he concludes:

Whatever talents a person may possess to amuse and instruct others, be they ever so inconsiderable, he is yet bound to exert them: if his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown.⁵⁵⁸

In contrast with the reasoners, Shelley notes that "it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton had ever existed":

⁵⁵⁵ Paul Fry, "Shelley's 'Defense of Poetry' in Our Time", in *The Reach of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), quoted in *Modern Critical Views Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea, 1985), 180.

⁵⁵⁶ Clark, 292.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 278.

⁵⁵⁸ CPW, 204.

The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.⁵⁵⁹

This final sentence, discussing the use of reason to overcome invention and creativity, seems to encompass what was a very difficult issue for Shelley and others of his time, and has carried through to our own era. It has already been noted how Shelley selectively adopted Godwinian principles, and Godwin's placing of reason at the helm of the human being is one that Shelley does not seem to have accepted. Therefore, Shelley's pronouncement is not necessarily a positive reflection on these great poets. David Lee Clark noticed this passage too, and felt compelled to add the following footnote: "This is not a renunciation of Shelley's youthful ideas as seen in *Queen Mab*, *Laon and Cythna*, and the early essays, but it is merely an extension of the meaning latent in those works."⁵⁶⁰ It seems that Shelley is less than pleased with both the reasoners and the exalted poets, though the reasoners are not held to be as culpable as the poets, because their level of skill is not as high; in this sense, the reasoners come out better. This is exactly what Shelley did in 'Dares the Llama', with the predatory animals being excused for their behavior, as they killed to sustain themselves, while human beings were held accountable for their acts of murder because it was fueled by avarice and ambition. Shelley goes on to offer an insightful commentary on the challenging issue of scientific analysis gaining supremacy over imagination, but it is far from clear what his conclusions are, or how poetry can solve this problem. Moreover, existing legislation across a broad spectrum of issues was not satisfactory for Shelley, even though great poets lived, and he admired certain basic principles of British law. He is in many ways contravening his position with sentences like these.

Seen in this light, *A Defence of Poetry* is a sobering as well as a puzzling document. This awareness is similar to Shelley's use of the Gothic or lilting lyrics to mask his deeper aims. The views expressed in *A Defence* are not at all content with the status quo, and that may apply to *Prometheus Unbound* as well. Recognizing the sarcasm and other literary devices employed in *A Defence of Poetry* can only increase its value in terms of shedding light on Shelley's thought. For example, here is a portion of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's attack on *The Monk*:

. . . As far, therefore, as the story is concerned, the praise which a romance can claim, is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal; . . . To this praise, however, our author has not entitled himself. The sufferings which he describes are so frightful and intolerable, that we break with abruptness from the delusion, and indignantly suspect the man of a species of brutality, who could find a pleasure in wantonly imagining them; and the abominations which he portrays with no hurrying pencil, are such as the observation of character by no means demanded. . . . The merit of a novelist is in proportion (not simply to the effect, but) to the *pleasurable* effect which he produces.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁹ Clark, 293.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., n64.

⁵⁶¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, review of *The Monk* (1796) in *Critical Review*, 19 (February 1797): 194-200, quoted in Wright, *Gothic Fiction*, 16, 153n21.

Shelley appears to have been making a veiled reply to Coleridge, confirming that irony was at least a partial component of Shelley's strategy in writing it, though far from the only one.

Shelley is rarely identified as a comic writer:

It is still often assumed that Shelley was too serious—and that Romanticism as a whole was too sincere—to indulge in satire. Such assumptions determine the canon, of course; and on this basis Shelley's satires, important documents of his effort actively to engage the social world, have been displaced, neglected, or discounted.

In fact, these ironic, public, referential, and worldly satires amount to an important countervoice within Shelley's work and within Romanticism as a whole. That voice is never simple. . . . Because he invests so much hope in the possibility of reforming his audience by changing their minds, Shelley is forced to take seriously (in a way that Byron, for example, is not) the problem of satire's double binds, its self-reflexive aggression.⁵⁶²

In studying the Gothic thus far, comedic elements have become apparent in Shelley's writing which extend beyond *The Devil's Walk*, *Peter Bell the Third*, *Ædipus Tyrannus*, *Swellfoot the Tyrant* and other satires which Jones has examined. It seems Shelley employed certain subversive strategies in his poetry and prose which are difficult to identify because of his sincerity of purpose. Indeed on the back of one of his notebooks, which is now in the Bodleian Library, SINCERITY AND ZEAL are inscribed.⁵⁶³

Jones notes the influence of Aristophanes' *The Frogs* on *Swellfoot*, and he also mentions *Lysistrata* as being even closer in theme, purpose and effect.⁵⁶⁴ This is a very important point because Aristophanes was not a tragedian like Æschylus, so his concerns were not existential, but immediate: practical, political and social. Moreover, like Shelley, Aristophanes found his voice as a young man, and won his first prize (second place) for *The Banqueters* when he was still too young to present the play in his own name, at sixteen or seventeen years of age.⁵⁶⁵ It was at approximately this same age that Shelley was publishing *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. Aristophanes is seen to be an elusive poet, and though he reveals his opinions on a variety of issues, few feel sure that they really know what his beliefs were:

One element of the poet's irony is his apparent frankness. He has at times the air of desiring to be taken seriously and seems to be expressing honest convictions. He is very suggestive and provokes reflection, but the attempt to reduce his opinions to system reveals the illusion. . . .

A proof of this deceptive quality of the poet's humour is found in the diversity of the opinions that have been held as to his purpose in writing.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶² Jones, *Satire*, 146.

⁵⁶³ Tatsuo Tokoo, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, vol. XXIII (New York: Routledge, 2002), 215.

⁵⁶⁴ Jones, *Satire*, 192, 192n40.

⁵⁶⁵ Moses Hadas, overview to *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes* (Toronto: Bantam, 1962), cover page.

⁵⁶⁶ John Williams White, introduction to *Aristophanes*, 3 vols. (London: William Heinemann and Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1924), 1:ix-xvi.

It would not be difficult to ascribe those statements to Shelley as well. Nor was Aristophanes bound by history and practicality, he invented his own world and populated it at will. Yet his plays were a double-edged sword, and the depth of knowledge which his Athenian audience possessed on a variety of issues, including literary matters, was remarkable:

Aside from its creative fantasy and its purgative wit, what makes the comedy of Aristophanes memorable is its exquisite lyrics and its serious commentary—on politics, poetry, education, good citizenship. . . . All the classic poets were looked upon and looked upon themselves as serious teachers— . . . but none seems so conscious of a teaching mission as Aristophanes. . . . “For children have tutors to guide them aright,” Aristophanes makes Aeschylus say in the *Frogs*, “young manhood has poets for teachers.”⁵⁶⁷

That sounds strikingly like Shelley’s own hypothesis in *A Defence of Poetry*. His technical mastery in employing a variety of comic elements throughout his prose and poetry, while skillfully shifting from comic to serious tones which highlight the contrast, is perhaps one of Shelley’s least understood and most under-appreciated skills, though Jones has made a major breakthrough.

It appears that Jonathan Swift exerted a powerful influence on Shelley’s thought. Swift wrote his own Latin epitaph:

Hic depositum est Corpus
JONATHAN SWIFT . . . ,
Ubi saeva Indignatio
Ulterius
Cor lacerare nequit.
Abi Viator
Et imitare, si poteris,
Strenuum pro virili
Libertatis Vindicatorem.

This has been translated as, “Here is laid the Body of JONATHAN SWIFT, . . . Where savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart. Go, traveler, and imitate, if you can, this strong defender, to the utmost of his powers, of liberty.”⁵⁶⁸ It seems that Shelley embraced Swift’s command completely, and followed it to the best of his ability. There are many similarities between the literary careers of the two men:

Most of Swift’s major prose writings, including the *Drapier’s Letters*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, appeared anonymously or pseudonymously. He had a strong penchant for mystification. In addition to his temperamental guardedness, he also shared a common feeling that it was ungentlemanly to appear by name in the public prints. Since many of his works contained elements that seemed politically subversive or personally offensive, there must also have been anxieties of a more practical kind.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁷ Hadas, introduction to *Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, 1-12.

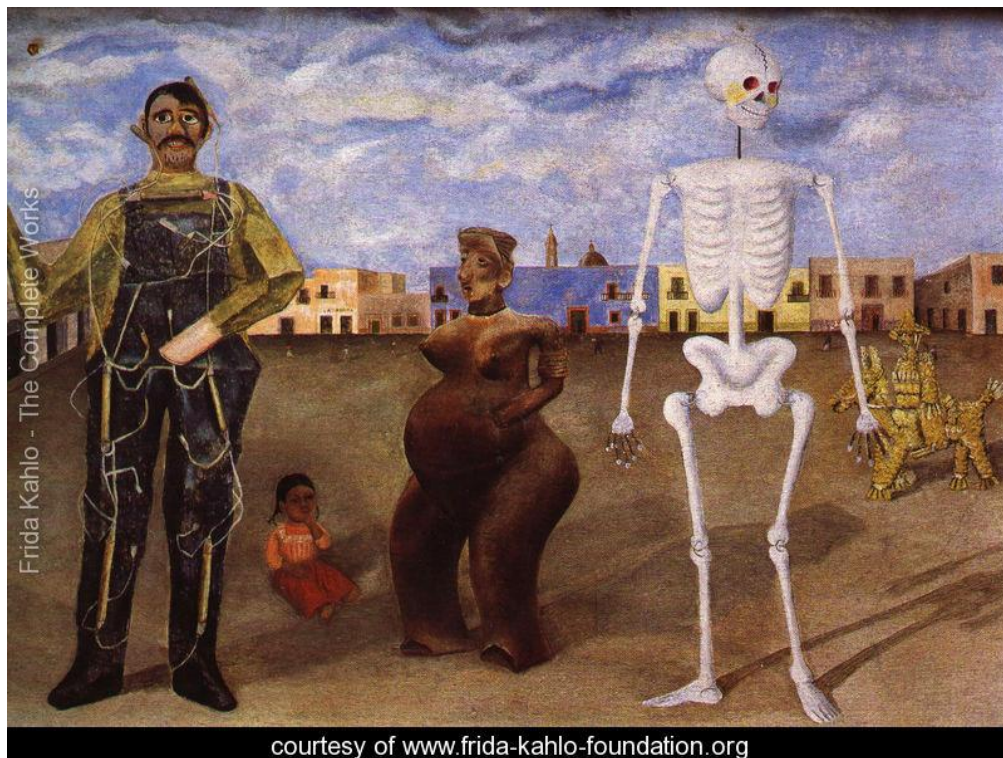
⁵⁶⁸ Rawson and Higgins, introduction to *Essential Writings of Swift*, xix.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

Moreover, Robert Demaria, Jr., explains another issue which appears in Shelley criticism too:

The relations between the fictional Gulliver and the real Swift are complex, like the relations between Swift and the very numerous other spokespersons he creates in his works. The complexity of these relations is one of the hallmarks of Swift's writing, as is their instability. It is notable that in the recently published *Dictionary of Literary Pseudonyms in the English Language*, Swift's entry is much larger than any other writer's, comprising forty-one pseudonyms. But in most of these figures, there is some resemblance to Swift.⁵⁷⁰

"The French Surrealist writer André Breton considered Swift the inventor" of what he called "savage or gallows humour" for its use of cannibalism.⁵⁷¹ "One of its features is that it flirts dangerously with its own literal content, thus entertaining a shocking thought by simultaneously meaning it, not meaning it, and, as it were, not not meaning it."⁵⁷² Sade of course was also known to be a writer of extremely black humor. The interplay between Shelley, Sade and Swift indicates that Shelley, though very sincere in his desire to reform the world, possessed a dark side not fully integrated into his œuvre at present.



courtesy of www.frida-kahlo-foundation.org
Four Inhabitants of Mexico City by Frida Kahlo 1938

⁵⁷⁰ Demaria, Jr., introduction to *Gulliver's Travels*, xxi, xxiin11.

⁵⁷¹ Rawson and Higgins, introduction to *Essential Writings of Swift*, xxiii.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

III

In addition to the Latin epigraph, Shelley lays the foundation for his play through the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. This is another confusing document filled with conflicting statements, and when read in relation to *A Defence of Poetry*, conclusions become even harder to draw. Certainly a writer has the right to change his or her mind, and need not be entirely consistent in thought, but it seems as though Shelley is being purposefully contrary here, with each of the tracts sparring off the other. First, in the preface, Shelley stresses competition between playwrights of the Greek stage, as well as “a certain arbitrary discretion,”⁵⁷³ citing variations on the same theme such as “the Agamemnonian story”, and he pulls himself into the fray by stating, “I have presumed to employ a similar licence.”⁵⁷⁴ He makes it clear that his goal is not to restore the lost drama of Æschylus, though Classical Greek scholars find that “Shelley has made the best-known attempt to repair the loss of the remaining plays.”⁵⁷⁵

One of the main reasons that Shelley says he is not filling in the missing gap is because “in truth, I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind.”⁵⁷⁶ Although the word ‘catastrophe’ contains in meaning “the final event of the dramatic action esp. of a tragedy,”⁵⁷⁷ nevertheless, a ‘catastrophe so feeble’ is an interesting combination of words, which seem to cancel one another out. Duffy sees this as a pun in terms of the French Revolution, in that “Such a capitulation would repeat the reactionary response of the ‘public mind’ to the collapse of the French struggle for liberty.”⁵⁷⁸ Wasserman, on the other hand, viewing the play from the perspective of myth, sees Shelley as a stoic who does not want his Prometheus to become “the weak, hedonistic apostate of the lost sequel who could not tolerate pain for the sake of his principles.”⁵⁷⁹ Yet Prometheus’ enchainment went on for “Thrice three hundred thousand years” (Act I, l 74), and the complex issues of pain and human suffering were alluded to in the epigraph, so it seems that there should be sufficient material for tragedy available to Shelley. These themes were good enough for Æschylus, who “had before him fundamental theological issues” even in *The Suppliants*, his first extant play, which were more fully developed in his masterpiece, the *Oresteia*, the only complete trilogy to survive. Classical Greek scholars find that the *Oresteia* “deservedly holds its position at the forefront of Greek tragedy along with the great Œdipus plays of Sophocles.”⁵⁸⁰ Shelley’s reluctance is a key to understanding what he is trying to do.

Perhaps the next section of the preface helps clarify Shelley’s meaning:

The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as

⁵⁷³ CPW, 204

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁷⁵ Paul Elmer More, trans., introduction to *Prometheus Bound* in *Complete Greek Drama*, 1:125-6.

⁵⁷⁶ CPW, 205.

⁵⁷⁷ Webster’s, s.v. “catastrophe.”

⁵⁷⁸ Duffy, *Sublime*, 152.

⁵⁷⁹ Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 283, 283n62.

⁵⁸⁰ E. D. A. Morshead, trans., introduction to *The Suppliants* in *Complete Greek Drama*, 1:6; E. D. A. Morshead, trans., introduction to *Oresteia* in *Complete Greek Drama*, 1:163.

unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary. The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which, in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. . . . But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.⁵⁸¹

This is a rather dramatic statement about Prometheus, and makes one wonder how much to believe. Taking Shelley at face value is expedient at times, but he is rarely this excessive. Moreover, the wording is again confusing when he states that Prometheus is “susceptible of being described as exempt from” negative characteristics; this is rather vague and legalistic terminology, and doesn’t exactly mean that Prometheus is really exempt from such feelings. The ambiguity is further confounded a little later in the preface when Shelley praises “the sacred Milton” as a “republican, and a bold inquirer into morals and religion.”⁵⁸²

Moreover, in *A Defence of Poetry*, the picture Shelley paints of Milton’s Satan is quite different from the one he paints in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*:

Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. . . . Milton has so far violated the popular creed (if this shall be judged to be a violation) as to have alleged no superiority of moral virtue to his God over his Devil. And this bold neglect of a direct moral purpose is the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton’s genius.⁵⁸³

It seems that Shelley is placing Satan and Prometheus in opposition to one another in his own mind, if not in that of his readers, when in fact his admiration for Satan and Milton are greater than what he is willing to concede in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. This is part of his strategy to encourage the reader to favor Prometheus by dissociating him from any taint of negativity. Shelley is using Milton and Satan as a foil; nevertheless, he himself appears to have some reservations, though he doesn’t want his readers to figure that out too easily. The complexities inherent in this drama are already well in view and the play has not even begun yet.

⁵⁸¹ CPW, 205.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 206.

⁵⁸³ Clark, 290.

The novels in relation to Prometheus Unbound

Plot Structure

For a reader immersed in the content of the novels, an immediate connection between *Prometheus Unbound* and *Zastrozzi* appears. This is the fact that Prometheus was kidnapped and chained against his will. Verezzi was also kidnapped and chained against his will, as was Laon in *Laon and Cythna*. Another interesting point is that Prometheus is watched over by two sisters, Ione and Panthea, while his true love, Asia, is far away and out of the picture. This is remarkably similar to the plot of *Zastrozzi*, for Verezzi loves Julia who is far from him, and he spends most of the novel in the presence of Matilda. Matilda has designs on Verezzi, but she masks them, and acts as lovingly and gently toward him as she can, putting his every need first. Panthea does so toward Prometheus too. Verezzi is grateful to Matilda for her kindness, but he does not love her in a romantic sense, and is faithful to Julia until close to the end of the novel, when he weds Matilda under an Orphic spell. Prometheus acts similarly, pining after Asia in spite of Panthea's loving ministrations. This is revealed toward the end of the first act, after the curse has been revoked and the spirits have fled. Prometheus wails:

How fair these airborne shapes! And yet I feel
Most vain all hope but love; and thou art far
Asia! . . .
All things are still: alas! how heavily
This quiet morning weighs upon my heart; . . .
There is no agony, and no solace left;
Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more. (Act I, ll 807-820)

To this, Panthea, sounding a lot like Matilda, retorts:

Hast thou forgotten one who watches thee
The cold dark night, and never sleeps but when
The shadow of thy spirit falls on her? (Act I, ll 821-823)

Prometheus, in a godlike and aloof fashion, though not without a hint of melodrama, replies:

I said all hope was vain but love: thou lovest. (Act I, l 824)

Panthea replies that she loves "Deeply in truth", but she immediately mentions Asia's "sad exile" and how Asia's "transforming presence" would fade if it were not mingled with his (Act I, ll 825-833). Then, like Cythna in *Laon and Cythna* at the end of Canto Second, she says "Farewell!" and departs to find Asia, marking the end of the first act.

Sexuality, Identity, Dreams

The first scene of the second act is highly charged erotically. Many similarities to the novels are revealed, with some critical differences and transformations. First of all, the dialogue between Panthea and Prometheus, followed by their dramatic parting at the end of Act I, has parallels to *Laon and Cythna*. In Canto Second, as we learned, Laon and Cythna shared a sexual intimacy, and then had to part for the betterment of the world, with Cythna aiming in particular to improve the condition of women. Cythna became pregnant at this time. Although the action is much shorter and far less explicit between Prometheus and Panthea, it is clear they share an intimate bond. She never sleeps except when the “shadow of his spirit” falls upon her, which sounds a lot like the mystical union between Zeus and Io, in *Æschylus’ Prometheus Bound*, after her long wanderings and suffering, when Zeus touches her with his hand. A child is conceived in that moment, and she loses the heifer-like qualities that Hera had imputed to her. Though subtle, it is not surprising that this spiritual union in sleep between Panthea and Prometheus is expressive of a sexual union, which results in a dramatic parting. Knowing *Laon and Cythna*, the parallel is clear, rather like the use of the word ‘Salamanca’ from *St. Irvyne* in *The Cenci* to signal the death of Count Cenci’s sons.

At this point, critical differences with the novels appear. In the opening of Act II, Panthea flies to Asia to tell her about her sexual union with Prometheus. Asia is both her sister and his lover, so it is a surprising move. To soften the blow, her opening words are, “Pardon, great Sister!” (This is quite funny when one realizes the dramatic tension and melodrama Shelley is building up.) As with the novels and some of the poems, a dream sequence is used to highlight the action. First, Panthea describes happy days in the ocean, before the “sacred Titan’s fall” (Act II, Scene i, l 40), and she mentions “the delight of a remembered dream” (Act II, Scene i, l 36). In those days, she “was wont to sleep / Peacefully and awake refreshed and calm” (Act II, Scene i, ll 38-39), so it seems that the delightful dream is of those bygone days:

Erewhile I slept
Under the glaucous caverns of old Ocean
Within dim bowers of green and purple moss,
Our young lone’s soft and milky arms
Locked then, as now, behind my dark, moist hair,
While my shut eyes and cheek were pressed within
The folded depth of her life-breathing bosom:
But not as now, since I am made the wind
Which fails beneath the music that I bear
Of thy most wordless converse; since dissolved
Into the sense with which love talks, my rest
Was troubled and yet sweet; my waking hours
Too full of care and pain. (Act II, Scene i, ll 43-54)

This erotic description of incestuous lesbian love is told openly and honestly, was shared in the company of the family, and contains no stigma whatsoever, only beauty. Clearly this intimacy is a longstanding

quality of Panthea's and Ione's relationship, and is something which is accepted and supported by their loved ones.

Asia quickly recognizes that this is only a prelude, that Panthea has come to say something else. She seems to be well-aware of the nature of Panthea's and Ione's sexual intimacy, and takes that in stride, as a kind of greeting or small talk, not the real issue at hand. In *Zastrozzi*, Shelley delicately hinted at homoerotic flirtation; here he makes it explicit. His positive attitude on this point is unmistakable. Impatiently, Asia asks to see Panthea's eyes that she may read the dream there, "Lift up thine eyes, / And let me read thy dream" (Act II, Scene i, ll 55-56). This reveals that there is another dream involved; the first is the "delightful" dream of the past before Prometheus was chained, and the second is after he fell. But Prometheus didn't exactly fall, he was caught, so the wording is confusing, symbolic of the fall of Saturn and other gods, or of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Moreover, people say that the eyes are the windows of the soul, so Shelley is drawing upon that maxim in this passage.

Panthea replies, "With our sea-sister at his feet I slept" (Act II, Scene i, l 57), confirming her earlier statements, though now, sleeping with Ione has moved into the present because Prometheus is chained. In her sleep suddenly, "two dreams came" (Act II, Scene i, l 61). So, in fact, there are three dreams all interwoven thus far in this sequence. Shelley is altering states of consciousness in a very subtle manner. One of the two dreams Panthea cannot remember, but the other, she does. In it, Prometheus, as Asia has just done, asks her to look at him, "lift thine eyes on me" (Act II, Scene i, l 70). The popular adage of eyes being the windows of the soul is repeated. Panthea does so, and has a highly charged erotic encounter with Prometheus (Act II, Scene i, ll 71-92), which nearly kills her, and in fact, in rejected verses she does explicitly state that she is dying:

Alas! I am consumed—I melt away
The fire is in my heart— . . .

(to Asia) O quench thy lips
I sink I perish . . .

(to Asia) Rest, rest!
Sleep death annihilation pain! aught else⁵⁸⁴

It is very Shelleian for the sexual union to result in death, and though the lines were cancelled, Panthea does state in lines which remain in the play, "I saw not, heard not, moved not, only felt / His presence flow and mingle through my blood / Till it became his life, and his grew mine, / And I was thus absorbed" (Act II, Scene i, ll 79-82). Finally, her "being was condensed" (Act II, Scene i, l 86), and she heard his voice and Asia's name alone among sounds which she could distinguish. Condensation is not the same thing as insemination or fertilization, so it does not seem as though she is pregnant, and as she was absorbed into his being, it seems that she lost her own body, or perhaps her body consciousness. Desmond King-Hele finds this to be a scientific description of sexual union, "the first of many sublimations of sexual

⁵⁸⁴ CPW, 269.

feeling into scientific form”⁵⁸⁵ but it seems to be quite overtly sexual, not sublimated, and quite dangerous for the female, and perhaps for the male too, though we learn about it from Panthea’s perspective. It sounds like a description of a transcendental experience, or a rending the veil, as Shelley would say, possibly involving death.

At this point, Ione awakens, and is angry with Panthea, bringing the audience back down to earth, so to speak. Ione explains that she no longer knows what she desires, “now I cannot tell thee what I seek; I know not;” (Act II, Scene i, ll 97-98), and blames it on Panthea:

‘ . . . It is thy sport, false sister;
Thou hast discovered some enchantment old
Whose spells have stolen my spirit as I slept
And mingled it with thine: for when just now
We kissed, I felt within thy parted lips
The sweet air that sustained me, and the warmth
Of the life-blood, for loss of which I faint,
Quivered between our intertwining arms.’ (Act II, Scene i, ll 99-106)

This is a most interesting passage. Ione is part of this mystical absorption and condensation, her spirit has been stolen, and she is losing her life-blood. She does not sense this through Panthea’s eyes, but through her kisses. Notice that she is fainting, or losing consciousness, recalling the fainting of Verezzi. The entire situation is sexually charged, mystical and frightening. This may be a transcendental experience on one level, but it is a horrific Gothic dream on another. Panthea has no answer for Ione, and flees to Asia (Act II, Scene i, ll 107-108), presumably leaving Ione there alone with Prometheus, but it is not clear, for Ione still has her arms wrapped in Panthea’s hair, and may indeed be with her, though Shelley does not explicitly say so. In any case, these two sisters are inextricably linked, like aspects of one another, involving a confusion of identity. Ione calls Panthea a “false sister”, which is harsh language in this elevated drama, indicating that all is not right between them in spite of their closeness. Clearly Ione can feel Panthea’s sexual connection with Prometheus and does not appreciate it. Sadly, the beauty of their long-term loving bond seems to be broken. Sperry notes that, “The scene is illuminated by Coleridge’s *Christabel*; however different Christabel’s traumatic slumber in the arms of Geraldine, the two scenes are linked by a common interest in the awakening of latent sexual desire.”⁵⁸⁶ My reading does not concur with this. Like Ione and Panthea, Prometheus’ and Asia’s identities are also intermingled, for their dialogue and actions are the same—they both want to look into Panthea’s eyes. Asia sees Prometheus in Panthea’s eyes, though it is rather anti-climactic after these highly charged scenes. He promises a future reunion, and with that Asia says, “The dream is told” (Act II, Scene i, l 126).

This ends the first of the two dreams which came to Panthea in the present, with the “rude hair” of another spirit arriving on the heels of the first dream, beginning the second dream. This one is composed of voices floating on the wind which possess “fine clear sounds” (Act II, Scene i, l 165). The experience has already entered Panthea’s mind and is part of her consciousness, perhaps as the result of

⁵⁸⁵ Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work*, 3rd ed., (London: Macmillan, 1984), 177, quoted in Sperry, *Verse*, 97.

⁵⁸⁶ Sperry, *Verse*, 96.

her sexual union with Prometheus (Act II, Scene i, ll 133-141). Asia notices that “The liquid responses / Of their æreal tongues yet sound” (Act II, Scene i, ll 171-172); and she remarks, “How the notes sink upon the ebbing wind!” (Act II, Scene i, l 195). This is an Orphic trance carried on the wind, similar to what Verezzi experienced in *Zastrozzi*. The voices are begging the goddesses to follow, follow, and finally, with the closing lines of Act II, Scene i, Asia states, “Come, sweet Panthea, link thy hand in mine, / And follow, ere the voices fade away” (Act II, Scene i, ll 207-208).

The significance of Act II, Scene i cannot be overstated. It is a shocking scene with very Gothic overtones. The three dream states are cleverly interwoven by Shelley making it difficult to follow the action, and at the end of the scene an Orphic trance is introduced. States of consciousness and identities are confused, as in the novels. The mingling of identities is beyond what he has done elsewhere, and is both mystical and deadly. It has all happened so fast. On a positive note, female homoerotic love is celebrated, is accepted, and does not engender dangerous consequences; in fact, it emerges as far more positive and beneficent than heterosexual love. At first, in stark contrast to the novels, where possession is the norm, it seems that free love holds sway on the Promethean precipice. However, that is not entirely true. Lone calls Panthea a “false sister” (Act II, Scene i, l 99) after she senses Panthea’s sexual bonding with Prometheus. Panthea will not answer her; instead, she runs away to seek solace in the arms of Asia. Though far more understated than in the novels, jealousy, loyalty and possession are present in this lofty play. Moreover, heterosexual encounters are not portrayed as positively as homosexual ones. They are terrifying, and impact the entire circle, not simply the two people locked in the union. It is reminiscent of the primal scene which cannot be spoken from *Zastrozzi*, the scorpion on Matilda’s breast which practically killed Verezzi (pp 36-37). In the novels, constraints of society warp the characters so that they will do anything to capture and possess a mate, including destroying rivals. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the women don’t succumb to that, they are loving and gentle, but the mere act of sexual union with a male is deadly, and not just to one, but to all. To be sure, heterosexual union in Shelley is a troubling event, usually resulting in death for the two lovers, but in *Prometheus Unbound* it possesses a more intense quality.

This intensity ushers in a second consideration. As in *The Cenci*, the point is pressed so far that it almost becomes funny. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this scene is that it can be read on so many levels at once. In addition to the Gothic horror, there is Aristophanic humor. If one views the sexual interplay in this way, it is grotesque. A monolithic male with a superior stance approaches Panthea, they have a powerful sexual union, which is communicated through their eyes, and she is totally destroyed, turning into condensation. Not only that, Lone, her lover, learns the truth from her kisses, and much to her dismay, she is destroyed too, and lashes out at her lover. To top it all off, Panthea immediately runs to Asia seemingly to escape Lone’s wrath and restore harmony to the picture, but there is another hidden motive, gossip. She goes to tell Asia that she has just slept with her husband. There are no secrets or discretion involved, and one could say that Panthea is flaunting her catch.

When Asia calls Panthea to her in her opening soliloquy (Act II, Scene i, ll 1-27), there is a sexual yearning in the passage. Asia exclaims, “Unwonted tears throng to the horny eyes” (Act II, Scene i, l 3), and considering that both Prometheus and Asia request to look into Panthea’s eyes, this is sexually provocative. Asia’s heart is pounding and she is not calm, “beatings haunt the desolated heart, / Which

should have learnt repose" (Act II, Scene i, ll 4-5). Spring is in the air, "thou dost wake, O Spring!" (Act II, Scene i, l 6). Asia is impatient and has desired her sister for far too long, "This is the season, this the day, the hour; / At sunrise thou shouldst come, sweet sister mine, / Too long desired, too long delaying, come! / How like death-worms the wingless moments crawl!" (Act II, Scene i, ll 13-16). (This is also reminiscent of Burns's 'Scots, wha hae'.) Asia at last senses Panthea's arrival, and notes, "How late thou art! The spherèd sun had climbed / The sea; my heart was sick with hope, before / The printless air felt thy belated plumes" (Act II, Scene i, ll 32-34). Panthea, on the other hand, is late because she has been exulting in a dream with Prometheus, making her opening line, "Pardon, great Sister!" (Act II, Scene i, l 35), sarcastic. Asia desires Panthea, but Panthea has come to tell her about her sexual exploit with Prometheus. When Asia learns this, as she quickly does, she cannot comprehend it, and reiterates that she wants to see Panthea's eyes, so that she "may read his written soul" (Act II, Scene i, l 110). It seems that words tell a story that is without substance, "as the air" (Act II, Scene i, l 109) and eyes can reveal more, not unlike in the trial scene of *The Cenci*.

But Panthea's eyes are not the window to her soul, they are the window to Prometheus' soul, a gender confusion. Asia's shadow is there too, as Panthea notes, "what canst thou see / But thine own fairest shadow imaged there?" (Act II, Scene i, ll 112-113). Moreover, Prometheus told Panthea that she was the shadow of Asia, "Whose shadow thou art" (Act II, Scene i, l 70), meaning that Prometheus, Asia, lone and Panthea are all shadows of one another. A shadow is not real, so in some sense all of the gods and goddesses are as specters, imagined beings that contain no substance. Nevertheless, the dramatic action is taking place through the gods, and while lone was jealous of Panthea, Asia is not. This may be because she isn't sexually attracted to Prometheus, they share an idealized, platonic type of love. While lone and Panthea express biting emotions at times, Asia remains aloof, above it all, so perhaps she is an idealized being, somewhat like Julia in *Zastrozzi*. Panthea can barely lift her eyes so heavy are they with what they need to express (the union with Prometheus) (Act II, Scene i, ll 111-112), but Asia sees the universe in her eyes, not a sexual being. Prometheus for her is the cosmos. Panthea seems to be an Aphrodite type of figure, inspiring physical love and desire in all she meets. It is interesting that she was originally of the ocean, like her sisters, but after Prometheus fell, her being was transformed, and she became of the wind, or air (Act II, Scene i, ll 50-54 & 108-109).

All of this sexual innuendo, which has been crafted with skill and care, can be read in another way, that is, expressive of sexually transmitted disease. Prometheus had the power to kill with his union (perhaps his sperm), and lone caught the disease second-hand through kisses (an exchange of fluids) but she also felt breath in those kisses, a breath which was able to rob her of her vital force: "The sweet air that sustained me, and the warmth / Of the life-blood, for loss of which I faint" (Act II, Scene i, ll 104-105). This means the disease could also be airborne or in the blood, and may not always be sexually transmitted. The concern is not simply sexual, but involves human beings living in close proximity to one another and therefore vulnerable to an exchange of disease.⁵⁸⁷ This is closely related to the troubling matter of science gaining precedence over imagination discussed earlier in *A Defence of Poetry*. How can disease be cured? Not through science alone, Shelley would seem to be implying. The humor has again turned serious, and Shelley minces no words concerning the deadly nature of this problem.

⁵⁸⁷ See Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: JHUP, 1999).

Humor and Existential Questions

Rarely is *Prometheus Unbound* identified as a humorous document, but, as has been discussed, humor is part and parcel of the Gothic, and is interwoven into this play, as it is in *The Cenci*. Nowhere is this more evident than in the portrayal of Demogorgon. When Asia and Panthea arrive at his abode, deep in the bowels of the earth, he is a shapeless, formless mass:

Panthea. I see a mighty darkness
Filling the seat of power, and rays of gloom
Dart round, as light from the meridian sun.
—Ungazed upon and shapeless; neither limb,
Nor form, nor outline; yet we feel it is
A living Spirit. (Act II, Scene iv, ll 2-7)

Knowing Shelley's atheism, and his attitude toward kings and rulers, it seems to be quite a sarcastic description. Demogorgon and Asia engage in a Socratic dialogue, with Asia asking questions, and Demogorgon answering, sometimes clearly and sometimes in riddles. This mirrors the action in Æschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, in which the chorus asks the questions and Prometheus provides the answers.⁵⁸⁸ This brings Demogorgon into the nebulous scope of identity that has already been noted concerning Asia, Prometheus, lone and Panthea. Moreover, Cronin notes that there is an overlap in identity between Jupiter and Prometheus:

Prometheus's first speech is proud; he glories in his untamed opposition to Jupiter. He defines himself in opposition to the god that he hates. But Shelley works to deny the reality of such an opposition even as Prometheus asserts it. Prometheus begins his speech by recognizing that he and Jupiter 'alone of living things' keep watch. The two are bound together by their mutual opposition, isolated not from each other, but from the world they inhabit. They are 'alone', and the word suggests not only their isolation, but also that they are in some sense one.⁵⁸⁹

Since Jupiter and Prometheus are one, there is no reason to suppose that Demogorgon cannot be an aspect of their being as well. All of these figures shadow each other, and certainly Demogorgon, more explicitly than any other god in the play, is purely a shadow, an indefinable mass.

Unlike the humor of Act II scene i, which was tempered with the scene's sincerity and seriousness, making the scene more frightening, Demogorgon offers some pure comic relief. This is unusual in the works studied thus far; Shelley frequently masks his humor adroitly. Demogorgon is funny and melodramatic, and unlike Prometheus and Jupiter, who revel in their godlike stature, he is approachable. He bids Asia ask him whatever she likes, and often he answers clearly. Like Count Cenci, he has a disarming quality to him, which in its own way serves to undercut the power of Jupiter and Prometheus. He is likeable. Finally, in Act III, Scene i, Demogorgon descends to depose Jupiter, and though Jupiter knows of Demogorgon, he cannot recognize him. Demogorgon describes himself as "Eternity", and the entire scene of Jupiter's overthrow is lighthearted. Demogorgon deposes Jupiter,

⁵⁸⁸ Æschylus, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1922), 1:260-633, II 507-525.

⁵⁸⁹ Cronin, *Thoughts*, 137.

lord of the universe, without any effort at all, demanding that Jupiter, "Lift thy lightnings not" (Act III, Scene i, l 56). It is dry wit at its best. He continues, "Yet if thou wilt, as 'tis the destiny / Of trodden worms to writhe till they are dead, / Put forth thy might" (Act III, Scene i, ll 59-61). This may not be devoid of all sense of revenge, but it is funny and indicates that Demogorgon is so free from fear of revenge that he is bored with his job. War is nothing he is going to take seriously, and there seems to be no question that Jupiter will be able to wage it. Demogorgon's speech is understated, Jupiter's is melodramatic. The entire scene is over in 83 lines; Jupiter is gone with a whimper in a flash. As in *The Cenci*, nowhere here do we find the poignancy of a tragic hero succumbing to his destiny because of a flaw in his nature. Jupiter's fall is pure camp, and he mirrors the language of Prometheus in falling, reinforcing Cronin's claim that the two figures are one. In Prometheus' opening soliloquy, he wails, "Ah me! Alas, pain, pain ever, for ever!" (Act I, Scene i, l 23) and when Jupiter falls he screams:

Mercy! Mercy!
No pity, no release, no respite! . . .

Ai! Ai!
The elements obey me not. I sink
Dizzily down, ever, for ever, down. (Act III, Scene i, ll 63-64 & 79-81)

In Scene ii of this act, right after Demogorgon and Jupiter fall together, Apollo and Ocean are discussing the event:

Ocean. He sunk to the abyss? To the dark void?
Apollo. An eagle so caught in some bursting cloud
On Caucasus, his thunder-baffled wings
Entangled in the whirlwind, and his eyes
Which gazed on the undazzling sun, now blinded
By the white lightning, while the ponderous hail
Bears on his struggling form, which sinks at length
Prone, and the aëreal ice clings over it. (Act III, Scene ii, ll 11-17)

This description makes it seem that Jupiter, in falling down to the dark void, has transformed into Prometheus himself, for he lands on Caucasus, a "thunder-baffled" eagle hovers nearby, hail pelts Jupiter's body, he is prone and covered with ice. Basically, he lands right on Prometheus! Shelley could not be more exact in merging Jupiter with Prometheus, which means that Jupiter is Prometheus, and not just in a figurative sense, now that he is deposed, he and Prometheus are one. This confirms the earlier ambiguity which was observed in the preface and *A Defence of Poetry*; Prometheus may be the champion of the human race, but he is still a god, and Shelley does not want him in power.

A great deal of debate has lingered over who Demogorgon is and what he represents. The Gothic may not be able to shed light on that question, but it is clear he is a caricature to some extent, and a shadow, as are all the other gods. Perhaps that is the point, these gods are figments of the human imagination and can be deposed rather easily, should people have the will to do so. This supports Mary

Shelley's claim in what Sperry describes as "the most interesting section of her note on *Prometheus Unbound*:"⁵⁹⁰

Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none. It is not my part in these Notes to notice the arguments that have been urged against this opinion, but to mention the fact that he entertained it, and was indeed attached to it with fervent enthusiasm. That man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the greater part of the creation, was the cardinal point of his system. And the subject he loved best to dwell on was the image of One warring with the Evil Principle, oppressed not only by it, but by all—even the good, who were deluded into considering evil a necessary portion of humanity; a victim full of fortitude and hope and the spirit of triumph emanating from a reliance in the ultimate omnipotence of Good.⁵⁹¹

Sperry concedes that "It has been increasingly common in recent years to discount Mary's statement as gross oversimplification. Her words, nevertheless, contain a vital element of truth."⁵⁹² The portrayal of Demogorgon and the ease with which Jupiter is overthrown support this claim, as does the shadowy nature of the gods and their identity which is condensed and absorbed into one another. Perhaps this is what Panthea's sexual union with Prometheus is intended to demonstrate on one level. Sperry explains why, even though "no contention about the play has been more common than that it dramatizes man's ability to transform himself and his world in the light of imaginative ideas,"⁵⁹³ her assessment has fallen out of favor:

Mary Shelley might on occasion simplify her husband's thinking. At the same time, she perceived what for him were certain fundamental moral truths that later critics, partly from an esoteric concern with the sources and ramifications of his philosophic thinking and partly from embarrassment with such intense idealism, have unhappily discounted.⁵⁹⁴

The Gothic and the early novels wholeheartedly support her in this claim, and that is not an easy statement to make concerning Shelley.

⁵⁹⁰ Sperry, *Verse*, 66.

⁵⁹¹ Mary Shelley, *CPW*, 271.

⁵⁹² Sperry, *Verse*, 66.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

Doubling

Doubling is a prominent feature of *Prometheus Unbound*, as it is in *Zastrozzi*, *St. Irvyne*, *Laon and Cythna*, and *The Cenci*. Tilottama Rajan notes that the “phantasmal repetition of characters in the early novel [*St. Irvyne*] strikingly anticipates what Shelley will do in *Prometheus Unbound*.”⁵⁹⁵ Panthea and Ione are so closely linked that they seem to be contained in one form, not two, and they are sexually intimate as well; Jupiter and Prometheus are as one; Prometheus and Asia share verbal commands in relation to Panthea; Prometheus has a sexual union with Panthea, and Asia longs to; Asia seems to represent ideal love while Panthea exudes physical sexuality, so in that sense Asia’s desire for Panthea represents the merging of physical and ideal love; Demogorgon and Prometheus share correspondences when compared with Æschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*; and when Demogorgon deposes Jupiter he does not replace him, as Jupiter had replaced Saturn, he falls too, linking them with one another. But this also separates Demogorgon in a way, for it gives him a measure of humility which the other gods do not share, and unlike Jupiter, Demogorgon reappears at the end of Act IV, delivering the final lines of the play. Demogorgon seems to be within the realm of the gods but not totally of it—though not a mortal. The name Shelley gives him, Eternity, can be defined as immortality, like a god or goddess, or as infinite time.⁵⁹⁶ Time is a quality relevant to human beings, so this makes Demogorgon’s voice closer to humanity than some of the others, which sheds light on the reason why Demogorgon has gained so much significance in analytical discussions of the play. In short, all of the gods and goddesses share traits and characteristics, and can in some sense be seen as reflections of each other, like Narcissus. However, Shelley does not limit the doubling to the gods, but extends it to the physical characteristics wherein the action is set.

Earth explains this quite directly in the opening scene of the play:

The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
For know there are two worlds of life and death:
One that which thou beholdest; but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows of all forms that think and live
Till death unite them and they part no more;
Dreams and the light imaginings of men,
And all that faith creates or love desires,
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes. (Act I, II 192-202)

In fact, this doubling can be seen even in the list of characters, for one is The Earth, and another The Spirit of the Earth, a second is Jupiter, and there is also The Phantasm of Jupiter, so this doubling is built right in. Jupiter is frequently referred to as Jove in the lines of the play, giving him yet another name which increases the ambiguity, because Jove is not listed as a character in the play, but he appears.

⁵⁹⁵ Tilottama Rajan, “Promethean Narrative: Overdetermined Form in Shelley’s Gothic Fiction” in *Shelley: Poet and Legislator of the World*, 241.

⁵⁹⁶ Webster’s s.v. “eternity.”

Moreover, Shelley does not list a character named Dream, but this character appears in Act II, Scene i, l 131, its only appearance in the drama, and its line is “Follow! Follow!” Panthea explains that “It is mine other dream” (Act II, Scene i, l 132), so one of Panthea’s two dreams actually enters the play surreptitiously, confounding the difference between dream and reality in a rather practical sense. (There is a part to cast which is not in the list of characters!) Interestingly, although The Spirit of the Moon is a character, The Moon itself is not (unlike the Earth), but the Moon appears in Act IV and has a big part to play. Voices, choruses and semi-choruses all appear which were not included in the list of *DRAMATIS PERSONÆ*. Spirits of the Hours are listed, but The Hours themselves are not, even though in Act IV a Chorus of Hours speaks. Something unusual is happening in Act IV which needs further exploration.

This doubling has consequences for the play in terms of time and space. First of all, time seems to be nonlinear. We have observed Shelley's incongruous use of time in the novels, and it is even more pronounced here, for a bit later in Act I, Mercury asks Prometheus, "Once more answer me: Thou knowest not the period of Jove's power?" (Act I, II 411-412), to which Prometheus replies, "I know but this, that it must come" (Act I, I 413). The word 'period' here has a double meaning. It can refer to 'the completion of a cycle: CONCLUSION' or simply to 'a chronological division: STAGE'.⁵⁹⁷ On the one hand, Prometheus is asserting that he is sure the end of Jove's reign will come, but on the other, that it has not yet begun (even though he is in chains), and that he is equally sure it will begin though he cannot say when. This means that the causal relationship between Jupiter or Jove and Prometheus being in chains is inverted or nonexistent, making the reason for Prometheus' enchainment uncertain. That accords with Shelley's use of chains in other poems, and his stressing that it is human beings who have forged those chains, and can also break them at will.

This kind of confusion with time occurs elsewhere in the play. Sperry identifies a passage in which Panthea and Asia are going, “To the Deep, to the Deep, / Down, down!” (Act II, Scene iii, ll 54-5), as part of what he considers to be Asia’s “initiation and reorientation.”⁵⁹⁸ For Sperry, “The effect is dizzying, like being drawn steadily deeper into a vortex”⁵⁹⁹ and he cites some additional lines sung by the Spirits to confirm this:

While the sound whirls around,
Down, down!
As the faun draws the hound,
As the lightning the vapour,
As a weak moth the taper;
Death, despair; love, sorrow;
Time both; to-day, to-morrow;
As steel obeys the spirit of the stone,
Down, down! (Act II, Scene iii, ll 63-71)

⁵⁹⁷ Webster's s.v. "period."

⁵⁹⁸ Sperry, *Verse*, 100.

599 Ibid.

Sperry insightfully notes that “Shelley was fond of inverting our customary sense of cause and effect,”⁶⁰⁰ but he takes this further:

Was it not, after all, possible for Shelley to intuit that within the rational mechanics of Newton’s universe such processes as time and motion are not unidirectional but reversible? The idea of a unidirectional causality, like the idea of a time that can move in one direction only, derives from our ingrained habits of consciousness and memory. Yet within the realm of pure physics, the laws that govern time and motion are not irreversible but symmetrical. . . . It may be difficult to accept the notion that Shelley anticipated the attack of modern physics upon the conception of ‘time’s arrow.’ Yet the inversion of our commonly accepted notion of causality, and with it the reversibility of time, seem to be exactly what Shelley is suggesting through the logic (or illogic) of his poetic figures.⁶⁰¹

This is a valid observation, and is one I believe Shelley was toying with from his earliest published works, including *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*. Of course, issues of time are part of Gothic conventions, as can be seen in the following example from *Zastrozzi*:

. . . —But, farewell for the present; I must order Bernardo to go to Passau to purchase horses.” [this is Zastrozzi speaking to Matilda].

The day passed on; each waited with impatience for the arrival of Bernardo.—“Farewell, Matilda,” exclaimed Zastrozzi, as he mounted the horses which Bernardo brought; and, taking the route of Italy, galloped off (p 25).

Behrendt’s explanation for this is that “this is an extreme—though not an extraordinary—example of the tendency in Gothic fiction to telescope events and incidents. Zastrozzi mounts horses which *in the previous sentence* he was still waiting for and which are never reported to have arrived.”⁶⁰² Nevertheless, because *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* are so concerned with states of consciousness and the doubling of characters, and because they possess such a misty sense of narrative cohesion, it is possible that this collapsing of events is part of a larger exploration on Shelley’s part. In that sense, Shelley’s use (and misuse) of time may not be limited to an application of Gothic conventions, but may be broader.

The doubling which the Earth identified in the first act concerning the Magus Zoroaster and the second unseen world is carried on throughout the play. When Prometheus is freed by Mercury, he tells Panthea, Ione and Asia that “Henceforth we will not part. There is a cave” (Act III, Scene iii, l 10) to which they will all retire, “Where we will sit and talk of time and change, / As the world ebbs and flows, ourselves unchanged” (Act III, Scene iii, ll 23-24). But shortly thereafter, the Earth speaks and tells them of a cavern “where my spirit / Was panted forth in anguish” (Act III, Scene iii, l 124) and she says, “This cave is thine” (Act III, Scene iii, l 147). Thus, there are two caves, both similar in description, mirroring each other. One was known to Prometheus, the other to Earth. Which one they actually wind up in is uncertain, though it seems to be the Earth’s, because she has her torch-bearer “guide this company

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 100-101, 216, n 14-15. See Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 264.

⁶⁰² B1986, 202-203.

beyond the peak" (Act III, Scene iii, l 153) to a temple which once bore Prometheus' name. Wasserman finds the cave to be "a conflation of many myths and symbols."⁶⁰³

Several scholars have a problem with Prometheus retreating to a cave right at the moment when it seems he should try to stand up and help humanity, including Cronin:

The other problem of the act [the first being the violent overthrow of Jupiter] is that Prometheus's decision to retire with Asia to a cave, where he plans to make daisy-chains and enjoy the rumours that reach him of mankind's progress, hardly seems an adequate resolution of his struggles.⁶⁰⁴

Debating this matter is not relevant to the matter of doubling, but it is important to the idealism and existential questions raised in the previous section, so will be briefly discussed. It can be observed that Timon the misanthrope retreated to a cave in the brilliant fourth and fifth acts of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. Timon resembles Count Cenci in the curses he spews forth onto all the Athenians who come within his reach in those acts, and then he dies perhaps of suicide, having prepared his own epitaph (of which in fact there are two, another doubling). Allowing for the ambiguity toward Prometheus which Shelley carefully veiled in the preface, it is possible he views Prometheus as a misanthrope of sorts, not in love with humans, but in love with his power over them. This is especially apparent in Æschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, when Prometheus delivers a long speech about mankind, and concludes by saying, "Hear the sum of the whole matter in the compass of one brief word,—every art possessed by man comes from Prometheus."⁶⁰⁵ This further supports Shelley in getting rid of the gods so easily. That he puts them in a cave remote from humanity, learning news only through echoes, is a supremely ironic twist. And it must be noted that Asia and Prometheus are not the only gods who are in the cave, lone and Panthea are there too, creating a love quadrangle. And an even more ironic twist is that Verezzi was chained in a cave at the beginning of *Zastrozzi*, having lost his freedom, and at the end of this play, Prometheus and the other gods, who are unchained and supposedly free, wind up in a cave. Those who are familiar with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in *The Republic* will easily recognize Shelley's jesting of that in *Zastrozzi* (pp 6-9) and it seems that that carries through to this cave as well.⁶⁰⁶

In Act IV there is another direct example of doubling within the physical space:

Panthea. But see where through two openings in the forest
Which hanging branches overcanopy,
And where two runnels of a rivulet,
Between the close moss violet-inwoven,
Have made their path of melody, like sisters
Who part with sighs that they may meet in smiles,
Turning their dear disunion to an isle
Of lovely grief, a wood of sweet sad thoughts;

⁶⁰³ Wasserman, *Critical Reading*, 280.

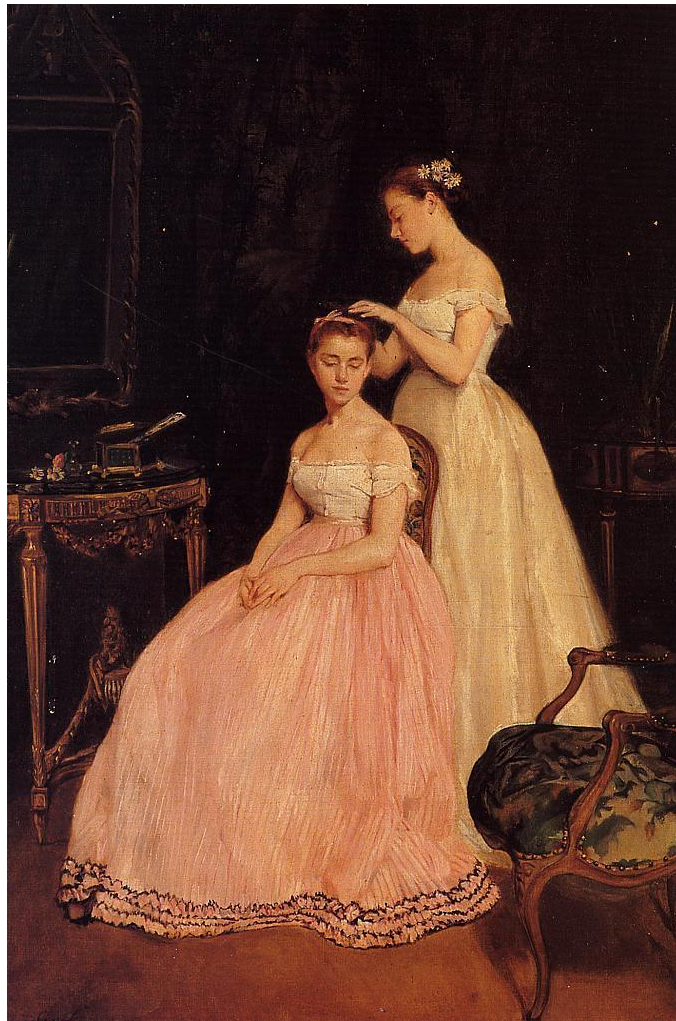
⁶⁰⁴ Cronin, *Thoughts*, 155.

⁶⁰⁵ Æschylus (1922), 1:258-9, ll 505-6.

⁶⁰⁶ *Dialogues of Plato*, ed. J. D. Kaplan, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Pocket Books, 1950), Book VII of 'The Republic,' 357-363.

Two visions of strange radiance float upon
 The ocean-like enchantment of strong sound,
 Which flows intenser, keener, deeper yet
 Under the ground and through the windless air. (Act IV, ll 194-205)

It is interesting that in this passage Shelley equates the doubling with sisters, mirroring the doubling between Panthea and Lone. Thus, the qualities of doubling of characters, which is quite common in Shelley, have been expanded, including time dilation and spatial metaphors. In terms of space, the doubling begins in Act I and continues all the way through to the end of the play. As for time, it isn't exactly a doubling, but an inversion. One wonders if the structure of the play mirrors that, for it opens with Act I, an act that contains no scenes, in the middle there are two acts with scenes, and the play closes out with Act IV, another act with no scenes. Could the play be read backward and arrive at the same place?



La Toilette by Eva Gonzalès, Private Ownership, 1879

Justice

One topic which is dear to Shelley's heart is justice, and this has not been touched upon yet. It seems evident that Shelley would not abandon a subject so central to all his other writings in this, his masterpiece. But it is a struggle to find it. I asked myself, Where is Justice? Where is the trial? Where are men and women railing against religious and political institutions in their quest for justice, happiness and freedom? Where is Shelley using his characters to push the boundaries of how much freedom an individual may entertain and still stay free within society? And to my surprise, I realized that it was not in *Prometheus Unbound* because there are no human characters in this play. Not one. In Æschylus' *Prometheus Bound* Io appears who is mortal and is suffering at the hands of the gods, bringing in the problem of justice and the wider existential issues of a human being's relationship to the universe. All of this is missing in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. The closest voice is that of the earth, and what the earth has to say provides a shocking revelation.

Earth appears in the opening act when the curse is revealed and revoked (or 'recalled' in both meanings of the word, as Cronin would say, meaning both 'to bring to mind' and 'to take something back'⁶⁰⁷), and she is distressed when Prometheus revokes it. It rends her heart, and she seems to sense an impending doom. The Earth does not appear again until Act III Scene iii, when Prometheus is untied. At this point, she gives an impassioned speech and mentions a reversal in Darwin's evolutionary concept of survival of the fittest, where all creatures will become "like sister-antelopes / By one fair dam, snow-white and swift as wind" (Act III, Scene iii, ll 97-98). This is not necessarily positive, as all diversity has been wiped out. Moreover, she mentions death, and at this Asia pipes up, "Oh, mother! Wherefore speak the name of death? / Cease they to love, and move, and breathe, and speak, / Who die?" (Act III, Scene iii, ll 108-110). Earth will not explain about death to Asia, but it becomes apparent that the gods in this play are functioning on quite a different plane than humans do. It is possible that Shelley is using Asia's lack of awareness of death to help point out the fragility of life, and the way that humans, though aware of death, ignore the fact that it will happen to them. In this scene, Earth introduces her cavern to Prometheus, and her parting words, which end the scene, are "Depart, farewell. / Beside that temple is the destined cave." (Act III, Scene iii, ll 174-175). Interestingly, in the following scene, the Spirit of the Earth appears, but the Earth does not. This is another doubling, but what does it mean? Where is the real Earth?

Earth makes her final entrance in Act IV, and at this time the earth, the moon and various spirits are in a Bacchic trance, as earth shouts, "The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness!" (Act IV, l 319). This reminds one of the Lethean joy of *Laon and Cythna*, a joy which did not last. The moon calls the earth her brother, again a gender confusion, as previously the earth had been known as mother or female. The earth and moon engage in a long and frenetic dance which is highly sexual (Act IV, ll 319-502). At one point the Earth cries, "And the abyss shouts from her depth laid bare, / Heaven, hast thou secrets? Man unveils me; I have none" (Act IV, ll 422-423). The brother/sister union between the earth and the moon is very Shelleian, but one wonders if they will be able to survive. It seems that as they whirl through space they are about to fly off their axes, if they haven't done so already. In most of

⁶⁰⁷ Cronin, *Thoughts*, 143.

Shelley's poems the erotic coupling ends in annihilation, and it seems that this is the case here too. The entire passage evokes the problem from *A Defence of Poetry* of scientific thought reigning over imagination, as Prometheus reigned over humankind. Immediately after the frenzy between the earth and the moon stops and "The stream of sound" (Act IV, l 506) ebbs away from Ione and Panthea, Panthea makes an astonishing speech:

Peace! Peace! A mighty Power, which is as darkness,
Is rising out of Earth, and from the sky
Is showered like night, and from within the air
Bursts, like eclipse which had been gathered up
Into the pores of sunlight: the bright visions,
Wherein the singing spirits rode and shone,
Gleam like pale meteors though a watery night. (Act IV, ll 510-516)

This could be interpreted positively or negatively, perhaps meaning that the eclipse was part of an interlunar event symbolizing the destruction of the earth and the moon and the life within it, though not that of the universe as a whole. There is a similar scene in *St. Irvyne*:

. . . an earthquake rocked the precipice beneath my feet; . . . clouds, as of chaos, rolled around, and from their dark masses flashed incessant meteors. I heard a deafening noise on every side; it appeared like the dissolution of nature; the blood-red moon, whirled from her sphere, sank beneath the horizon (p 183).

At this point in the play, Demogorgon appears again, offering reassurance to all who can hear. This includes the Earth, who says "I hear: I am as a drop of dew that dies" (Act IV, l 523), and the Moon, "I hear: I am a leaf shaken by thee!" (Act IV, l 528). Everyone listens, reminiscent of the end of the poem 'Orpheus' (written a year or two later): "Not even the nightingale intrudes a note / In rivalry, but all entranced she listens" (ll 123-124). However, while that ending is satisfactory, the one in *Prometheus Unbound* is unsatisfactory, a bit like the Conclusion to 'The Sensitive Plant'. In 'Orpheus,' it must be admitted, the characters are in his bower in the underworld, so all is quiet reflecting death. As in *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley skillfully mixes positive imagery and ideas with more obscure ones, making the truth of what he means to convey difficult to discern. Demogorgon's final line celebrates "Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory" (Act IV, l 578), an unsettling conclusion because Shelley does not support empire, and Demogorgon is himself a god, if only a shadow. Nowhere is the human voice heard.

The Spirit of the Hour is another voice which comes close to expressing the human condition in *Prometheus Unbound*. After Prometheus is unchained, and the earth has revolutionized itself, the Spirit of the Hour "floated to the earth: / It was, as it is still, the pain of bliss / To move, to breathe, to be" (Act III, Scene IV, ll 124-126). This also is reminiscent of *Laon and Cythna*. Although human existence is filled with pain, it is a state the eternal gods envy. In the ending of Act III of *Prometheus Unbound*, this Spirit describes the new human condition with a touch of humor, but extreme poignancy:

. . . just, gentle, wise: but man /
Passionless?— no, yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made or suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,

From chance, and death, and mutability,
 The clogs of that which else might oversoar
 The loftiest star of unascended heaven,
 Pinnacled dim in the intense inane. (Act III, Scene iv, ll 197-204)

In this passage, Shelley is cautious about humankind's desire to 'oversoar' its bounds, and he emerges as a singer for harmony between science, imagination and the earth, with imagination in ascendance, not science. Perhaps the entire play is a galactic joke, intended to startle the audience out of thought, as in *Laon and Cythna*. Rather than worrying about Shelley's cosmology for gods he seeks to relegate to a cave, perhaps humans should take action in a positive direction now, before it is too late. This would include respect for the earth and her beauty, and living and working in harmony, rather than attempting to domineer one another as well as the planet.

This may be the reason Shelley celebrates brother and sisterly love in the form of incest. It is not the same as a parent's love for a child, or a child's for a parent or lovers for one another. Sibling love is freely given, and is on an equal footing, authority is not part of it and it extends to the wider family circle of friendship among women, men, and all. Antigone, who buried her brother Polyneices in disobedience to a decree of the city, placing sisterly love paramount over the law, is one of Shelley's favorite images of this type. There is a sense of urgency and speed in all of Shelley's work, and this may be one of the reasons he associates death with the bridal bower. Marriage rites are a time of happiness when people feel secure about the future and possess a desire to protect themselves and their families. They do not want to think about death or the fleeting nature of life and of all gifts, but he will not let us forget. Even in the fulfillment of such love, people need to think about love for all. According to Behrendt, "The poet, above all others, defines himself or herself in terms of society rather than merely of self,"⁶⁰⁸ but it would seem Shelley wants every human being to be a poet in his or her own way. Fanny Imlay again goes straight to the heart of the matter in a rather personal letter:

I am angry with Shelley for not writing himself—it is impossible to tell the good that poets do their fellow creatures—(at least those that can feel). Whilst I read I am a poet—I am inspired with good feelings, feelings that create perhaps a more permanent good in me, than all the everyday preachments in the world. It counteracts the dross which one gets in the everyday concerns of life & tells us there is something yet in the world to aspire to—something by which succeeding ages may be made happy, or perhaps better. If Shelley cannot accomplish any other good—he can this divine one.—Laugh at me but do not be angry with me for taking up your time with my nonsense.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁸ Behrendt, *Audiences*, 237.

⁶⁰⁹ Fanny Imlay to Mary Godwin, 41 Skinner Street, 29 July and 1 August 1816, in *Clairmont Correspondence*, 1:57.

Lyric Interlude IV

'The Sensitive Plant' & *Adonais*

Rather than poetics, this section addresses a relevant editorial example concerning Shelley scholarship. It is natural that a writer's first editor, often a relative or trusted friend, wants their hero or heroine to look good in the eyes of the world during their own era. This happened with Horace Walpole's papers, which were edited by his dear friend, Mary Berry, who removed sections that she feared would tarnish his reputation. According to W. S. Lewis, the editor of *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*:

No letter which passed through the hands of Mary Berry remained the same. She inked out paragraphs, suppressed proper names, and wrote her notes wherever there was room for them. Her object was to improve the letters by deleting what she considered to be their less brilliant passages—the passages which are today, as often as not, of the greatest interest—for the Walpolian orchestra must play *fortissimo* or not at all. Hannah More was solely concerned with her responsibility to the public morals, in case the letters to her should ever be published; a responsibility she lived up to with her pen, or, in great emergencies, with her scissors. She returned good for evil, however, and substituted words and phrases which could enter the mind of innocence without danger. All subsequent editors have suppressed passages, but this practice has been abandoned in the present edition.⁶¹⁰

A similar thing happened with Shelley's translation of Plato's *Symposium*. Mary Shelley published it in her 1840 edition of Shelley's prose works, but "censorship had mutilated the corpse, and made the published version more of a liver than a heart."⁶¹¹ Later editions have restored the manuscript as Shelley wrote it. Such a process is inevitable.

Another example can be found in the Norton Critical second edition (2002), in which the following stanza is included in 'The Sensitive Plant':

Their moss rotted off them, flake by flake,
Till the thick stalk stuck like a murderer's stake,
Where rags of loose flesh yet tremble on high,
Infecting the winds that wander by. (ll 66-69 of Part Third)

This is explained as follows:

Some editors have omitted this stanza (which describes a body rotting on a gibbet) on the grounds that it is canceled in Mary Shelley's transcript and that she omits it from her collected editions. But the first fact probably explains the second, and since all editors follow the other substantive features of the first edition rather than

⁶¹⁰ W. S. Lewis, preface to *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937), xix-xx.

⁶¹¹ David K. O'Connor, introduction to *The Symposium of Plato: The Shelley Translation*, ed. David K. O'Connor, trans. Percy Bysshe Shelley (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), xiv.

Mary Shelley's quite different safekeeping transcript, it seems logical to retain this stanza also.⁶¹²

This is a sound editorial decision placing the wishes of the poet in the forefront. It should be noted here that in *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics*, Volume V, published in 1991, eleven years previously, the editor, Donald H. Reiman —also an editor of the Norton text —notes that

near the bottom of this page, PBS canceled a stanza that, on rereading, he may have found too garish. The cancellation threw off the stanza numbers for the rest of the poem, thus showing that either PBS or MWS (and the numerals seem to me more likely to be his than hers) numbered the stanzas before PBS read through the poem in detail and made his numerous stylistic corrections.⁶¹³

It appears that Reiman reconsidered and changed his mind within that time frame. Certainly the note in the 2002 Norton edition keeps the stanza for reasons cited above. In the facsimile, three vertical lines are marked through the original stanza, and the Longman series (Volume 3, 2011) also retains it because the editors cannot determine upon whose authority it was cancelled. Moreover, they change the word 'moss' (l 66) to 'mass', as that seems to have been a transcription error.⁶¹⁴ All of this makes sense to me.

E. B. Murray has acknowledged the profound debt the scholarly community owes to Mary Shelley.⁶¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is necessary to respectfully allow the space for subsequent scholars to rectify any mistakes which may have been made out of deference to her loved one's reputation, as well as her own and her heirs. The rationale is similar to a sentiment that Hazlitt expressed concerning the Lake School of poetry, which he admired:

a school which, with all my respect for it, I do not think sacred from criticism or exempt from faults, of some of which faults I shall speak with becoming frankness; for I do not see that the liberty of the press ought to be shackled, or freedom of speech curtailed, to screen either its revolutionary or renegado extravagances.⁶¹⁶

The problem to be examined involves *Adonais*. *Adonais* is one of the rare poems, like *The Cenci*, published in Italy under Shelley's guidance. He wrote to Ollier that "The poem is beautifully printed, & what is of more consequence, correctly: indeed it was to obtain this last point that I sent it to the press at Pisa."⁶¹⁷ Mary Shelley in her edition of 1839 made "several errors" along with "at least three verbal changes that must have had Shelley's authority behind them (lines 72, 143, 252)."⁶¹⁸ There is no written record of corrigenda in Shelley's hand; he died suddenly, and he dealt with his editors himself.

⁶¹² P&P, 293, 293n6.

⁶¹³ Donald H. Reiman, ed. *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics: A Facsimile Edition, Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Harvard Shelley Poetic Manuscripts*, vol. 5 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 163-164 & Folio 6 recto = page "56".

⁶¹⁴ Longman 3:311n66-9, niii66. *mass*].

⁶¹⁵ Murray, ed. dedication to *Prose Works*, 1:v.

⁶¹⁶ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on English Poets (1818)*, *The Spirit of the Age (1825)* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1910), "On the Living Poets," 161.

⁶¹⁷ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Bagni di Pisa, July 1821, 2:311.

⁶¹⁸ P&P, 408.

Nevertheless, these changes of hers are still adopted in most texts, including the Oxford Hutchinson edition of 1905 and thereafter, the Julian edition of 1928 and the Norton second edition of 2002. Editors have replaced Shelley's lines, published by him, with Mary Shelley's lines. His original lines can be found in a footnote, but not in the poem proper.

Particularly troublesome is the Norton second edition, which eliminates a footnote altogether, making Shelley's original line impossible to locate within that volume. Moreover, while Reiman and Fraistat acknowledge at least three verbal changes in their introduction to the poem, because they then drop one of the footnotes (the one at line 143), the third footnote at line 252, explains, "Mary Shelley's emendation of this line and line 72 certainly reflects Shelley's wishes."⁶¹⁹ I wonder how they can be so sure. Shelley's original, published in Italy under his guidance, is one of the few poems to have that honor. Is it wise to change it without firmer evidence? This is contrary to the editorial decision applied to 'The Sensitive Plant', yet it is in the same book. (See Table 1, and Figures 1, 2, & 3 below.)

Only one of the changes will be examined. The original line 72 of *Adonais* reads "Of mortal change, shall fill the grave which is her maw". Mary Shelley eliminated the words 'grave' and 'maw'. Shelley's use of the word 'grave' and imagery of charnel houses is too frequent to be recounted; 'maw' is a little more unusual but it appears in a letter to his friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, written in 1811:

Yet you say that millions of bad, are necessary to the existence of a few preeminent in excellence. Is not this a despotism of virtue which is inconsistent with it's nature—Is it not the Asiatic tyrant who renders his territory wretched to fill his seraglio? the shark who must glut his maw with millions of fish, in order that he may exist?⁶²⁰

It also appears in the poem 'Verses on a Cat':

V
But this poor little cat
Only wanted a rat
To stuff out its own little maw; (ll 25-27)⁶²¹

And in the poem 'Revenge':

'This night will I go to the sepulchre's jaw,
Alone will I glut its all conquering maw.' (ll 19-20)⁶²²

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 419n4.

⁶²⁰ Shelley to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Sunday, 28 April 1811, 1:71.

⁶²¹ Longman1:3-4.

⁶²² Ibid., 26-29.

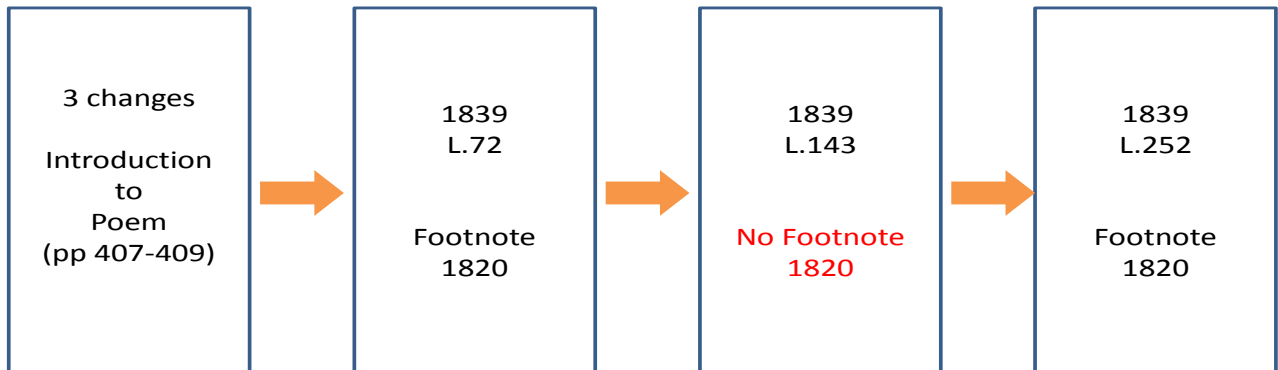


Table 1

*Adonais as presented in Norton 2nd edition 2002
(1839 refers to Mary Shelley's edition, 1820 to the original published by Shelley.)*

Line 72	MWS
Footnote	Shelley
Line 143	MWS
Footnote	×
Original	×
Footnote (1905)	Shelley
Line 252	MWS
Footnote	Shelley

Figure 1

*Adonais as presented in Norton 2nd edition 2002
(1905 refers to Hutchinson Oxford edition, reprinted thereafter.)*

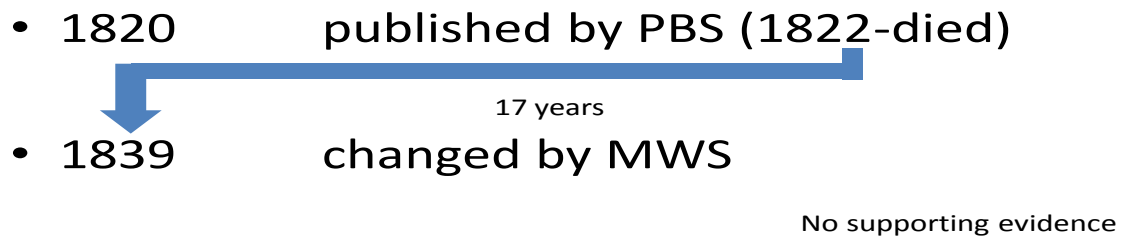


Figure 2

A flow chart of the changes

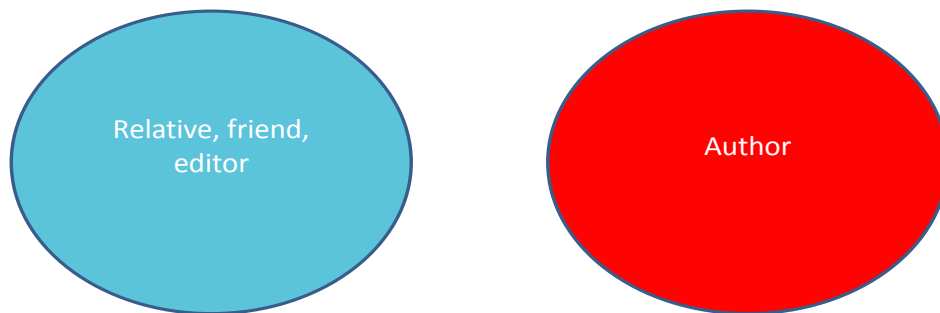


Figure 3

A more desirable representation of the position of the author in relation to his editors

Conclusion

Thomas Weiskel's description of the preface to *Alastor* hits upon many of the themes which have been explored herein:

That is astonishing, outrageous prose. I should be the last to deny its rhetorical power or the force of its bitterness, but ethically it makes no sense and it shows a deeply fractured mind defending itself. . . . The split results in the oxymoronic phrases—'deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition'.⁶²³

Bloom concurs that Shelley "started as a split being, and ended as one, but his awareness of the division in his consciousness grew deeper, and produced finally the infernal vision of *The Triumph of Life*."⁶²⁴ This split, what O'Neill would call 'conflict', is at the heart of my thesis. Shelley's lyric mastery and his talent as a Gothic Romance novelist are two halves of one whole. But there is also the matter of his life, and of the way in which his choices often seemed to result in action contrary to his political vision. This is especially true of his treatment of Harriet. I would argue that the split grew greater over time, not less, in both his life and his art, and that his radical efforts to fight class privilege continued to the moment of his death. Cenci's desire "to poison and corrupt" Beatrice's soul can be seen as a means of attacking the *patria potestas* at its foundation – inequality of women, just as in *Laon and Cythna*. Shelley was an artist through and through, "a poet of the highest decorum,"⁶²⁵ and a radical to the core of his being. This radicalism was not a theory with him, but a practical reality to be manifested resolutely. Because enacting his ideals frequently placed Shelley and his loved ones at risk, he was evasive, a quality which manifests very early in his work and his life. Hence the conflicting stances in letters and publications, which make it difficult to ascertain where he stands. Shelley was ahead of his time, and he remains so.

Examining the novels in light of the later poetics was impossible to do without incorporating Shelley's politics. I hope at least to have demonstrated that the novels are excellent works of art, politically sophisticated and psychologically astute, and that they influenced his later productions. In addition, knowledge of these works provides a new depth and insight for those who care to seek it out. The novels are not a requirement, as Shelley's full power is written into his poetics, but they are a treasure, and one which he wanted hidden. Unlike Denis Diderot, Shelley published his novels, but then he disavowed them, and perhaps for the same reason that Diderot would not publish his novels in his lifetime – he knew that it was too soon. Yet Shelley wrote to Ollier, "Pray send me news of my intellectual children. For 'Prometheus' I expect and desire no great sale. 'The Cenci' ought to have been popular."⁶²⁶ This is expressive of the tender affection Shelley felt toward the Gothic.

In addition, the novels offer a new range of exploration, in particular concerning the issues of justice, suicide, gender roles, relations between the sexes, humor, and last but not least, action rooted in kindness. I often wonder what kind of an economic model Shelley would want to put in place in order

⁶²³ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: JHUP, 1976), 148.

⁶²⁴ Bloom, *Ringers*, 90.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶²⁶ Shelley to Charles Ollier, Pisa, 16 February 1821, 2:263.

to achieve his vision. That I may never know. What is clear, however, is that he rests power with the individual, and a great power it is indeed. Under proper conditions, Gandhi, who had *The Mask of Anarchy* memorized, felt that if an individual pitted “one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant” it would then be “possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire . . . and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or its regeneration.”⁶²⁷ I believe Shelley was doing that against the evils which beset human civilizations, such as avarice, lust for power and defining women as property.

In many ways, the choices Shelley made weakened him in the eyes of the *patria potestas*, and he himself is viewed as a strange creature, rather like a child or an angel, with Mary Shelley, his wife, in charge. This inversion of the paternalistic society is seen as progressive, but it is merely an inversion; critics portray relationships in the Shelley circle as highly competitive. This is an out-of-date methodology; true feminism does not rest on such a hierarchy, nor is it exclusionary in nature. Mary Shelley is being used by experts as a perfect defense of the old order because Shelley’s choices were too threatening, and they remain so. I would be the first to admit that he is at the root, and that his “oxymoronic phrases”, to use Weiskel’s term, can lead one on wild goose chases. In fact, he was using his position of privilege as a weapon against the *patria potestas*, and he enlisted those within his circle to help him. The relevant point here is that critics define Harriet and Mary in terms of their relationship to Shelley – a man and their husband – which is to say it is his actions in relation to each of them which determine their status. This reinforces the *patria potestas*, rather than calling it into question. The letters of Shelley concerning Harriet’s final days were intended to draw attention to this. It must be stressed that this is not to do to Mary what has been done to Harriet, but to stop the cycle of shame altogether.

Although the events of Shelley’s life cannot be ignored, they nevertheless can leave one in a quandary of quick sand which can be difficult to extricate oneself from, and which can become an impediment to appreciating him as a writer. But perhaps that is the point, that his politics, his prose and his poetics are inextricably linked. His lyric mastery when viewed with the novels in mind can result in discomfort, disillusionment and confusion, but that is emblematic of his power. Studying Shelley can take one out to sea, and leave one there – at sea. But losing anchor is necessary in order to be unhitched from the chains which bind us and to appreciate even a fraction of what he has to say. At the same time, his writing touches us in a way which is devoid of external social and political systems, and is free from the limits of time as well. I learned during the aftermath of the disaster in Northern Japan that the act of reading Shelley is empowering in and of itself, and is one which, as Ellis noted, can grow and grow if nurtured.⁶²⁸

Finally, I would like to end with a discussion of a poem which was written very near to Shelley’s death, only three weeks before, which is now kept in the Bodleian Library with *The Triumph of Life* manuscript. Its title is ‘Lines written in the Bay of Lerici’. It is a love poem, and Reiman and Fraistat have identified its subject as Jane Williams.⁶²⁹ The poem is addressed to the moon, “Bright wanderer, fair

⁶²⁷ Eknath Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man*, 2nd ed. (Petaluma, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1972, 1978), 156.

⁶²⁸ Ellis, “Some words”, 1:vii-viii.

⁶²⁹ *P&P*, 480-481, 480n1.

coquette of Heaven" (l 1), and the salutation also applies to the lady in the poem, who is as fair as the moon "but far more true" (l 6). The woman "left me" (l 7 & 15), seeking "her Ocean nest / In the chambers of the west" (ll 13-14). This implies that she was loyal to the poet, is dead, having died in water, and is now in the Elysium Fields. Shelley still loves her "—O too much— / The soft vibrations of her touch / As if her gentle hand even now / Lightly trembled on my brow" (ll 21-24), and as he watches the boats gliding in and out of the bay, he imagines that they seek a cure for his broken heart: "As if to some Elysian star / They sailed for drink to medicine / Such sweet and bitter pain as mine" (ll 42-44).

Although multiple readings are possible with all of Shelley's poems, it seems that this is for Harriet, Shelley's first wife, because it captures a haunting melancholy which is not synonymous with the desire he felt for Jane Williams in the present time. It is a story of the past, and of a longing that can never be fulfilled. The inconstancy of the moon is mentioned by Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, and she also committed suicide at a young age for her beloved. The poem manifests a magical quality reminiscent of *Queen Mab*, a creation dedicated to Harriet, with "spirit-winged chariots sent / O'er some serenest element / To ministrations strange and far" (ll 39-41). Harriet drowned, leaving him (although he had left her first), and is an albatross around his neck, one which will never fall into the sea as it does in Coleridge's poem.

But this poem is not only for Harriet, it is also for his muse, "Her presence had made weak and tame / All passions, and I lived alone, / In the time which is our own; / The past and future were forgot / As they had been, and would be, not—" (ll 28-32). The poem ends on a Gothic note, with graphic violence, which destroys the softness of the early part of the poem, but not its effect. The "fisher with his lamp" who "struck the fish who came / To worship the delusive flame" (ll 51-53) may be none other than Shelley himself, and this part of the poem could also be for Fanny Imlay. I would fill in the missing word in the final couplet as follows:

Too happy, they whose pleasure sought
Extinguishes all sense and thought
Of the regret that pleasure cease
Destroying life alone not peace. (ll 55-58)

"Familiar acts are beautiful through love" (*Prometheus Unbound*, Act IV, l 403), and study of Shelley's youthful works in relation to the poetry has been such an act. Another side of Shelley is emerging, like the moon from behind a cloud, or lightning on a hot summer night. In part,

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself. (*Prometheus Unbound*, Act III, Scene iv, ll 193-197)

Thank you.



Windflowers

by John William Waterhouse, c1900

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