

**Sweet degradation – the persistence of the Gothic in Shelley's representations of love**

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**The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own, and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the persistent influence of Gothic fiction upon the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley throughout his career, beginning with its obvious manifestations in his early novels and the *Victor and Cazire* poems, and proceeding to trace its continued presence throughout the major works. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of this trope within depictions of love and sexuality – a conjunction which may be traced from the juvenile period to ‘The Triumph of Life’ – and it is argued that in spite of repeated attempts to devise a redemptive system of sexual ethics (most comprehensively attempted in the Platonic commentary ‘A Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love’), Shelley is unable to reject his psychological scepticism which the Gothic – with its depictions of morbid and sadistic sexuality – embodies.

Chapter one focuses upon the early works – especially *Zastrozzi* – with particular comparison to the powerful influence of *The Monk* and *Zofloya* upon Shelley at this period. The possible early influence of Plato – especially the *Phaedo* – is also considered, as well as the gothic cadences of Plato’s own work.

Chapter two deals with *The Cenci*, considering it as the most obviously gothic work of Shelley’s mature career. His use of the genre is explored in psychoanalytic and socio-political terms, and compared to Freud’s *Civilisation and its Discontents* as a dramatic study in dysfunctional social institutions.

Chapter three considers the figure of the vampire and other parasitic lovers of Romantic fiction, concluding with the veiled apparition of ‘Alastor’. Dante’s dream of the siren in the *Purgatorio* is presented as a possible prototype with this manifestation of a self-consuming, antisocial existence. Conversely, however, society itself is presented in none too attractive or redeeming a light.

This dilemma leads into Chapter four, where the reform of society by the exposure and

abolition of ‘crimes of convention’ (in Shelley’s terms) is the central issue. Incest is considered both as an example of a pointless and unethical social code (as depicted by Shelley), and as a possible expedient for promoting Platonic relations within a fully-sexual partnership.

Chapter five deals with ‘The Triumph of Life’, in which gothic horror comes to the fore along with new heights of pessimism regarding worldly sexuality. The legacy of Rousseau, and his profound influence on Shelley, is intertwined with this, and the poem appears to be reaching away from the sensuality of the disgraced philosopher towards a more rarefied, Dantean concept of love, when it breaks off.

Chapter six pursues the Dantean theme through *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais*, paying particular note to the claiming of the deceased Keats as a more appropriate spiritual guide than Emilia Viviani. It considers whether this constitutes an affirmation of transcendent Platonic love, or an outright rejection of sexuality as ‘sweet degradation’, chaining humanity to the apparent and imperfect.

### Textual Notes

Most of Shelley's poems in this study are cited from Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers' edition of *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, with the exceptions of *Laon and Cythna*, 'Rosalind and Helen', the *Victor and Cazire* poems, 'Invocation to Misery', and *Queen Mab* (and the Notes), cited from Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthew's two-volume *The Poems of Shelley*. 'Fiordispina' and 'Ginevra' are cited from Thoman Hutchinson's edition of *Shelley's Poetical Works*. With the exceptions of *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* (from Stephen C. Behrendt's double edition), Shelley's letters (from Frederick L. Jones' two-volume edition), and the 'Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love' (from *The Platonism of Shelley*), *A Defence of Poetry*, and 'On Love' (from Reiman and Powers), Shelley's prose is cited from E. B. Murray's two-volume *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.

Abbreviations of main quoted sources:

*Letters I*      *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Vol. 1).

*Letters II*     *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Vol. 2).

*POS*            *Poems of Shelley* (Everest and Matthews).

*PP*              *Poetry and Prose* (Reiman and Powers).

*PrW I*         *Prose Works* (Vol. 1).

*ZSI*            *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne*

Double quotation marks are used within this study to indicate quotes or speech within quoted passages.

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## Introduction

*Lucifer.*       And if there should be  
 Worlds greater than thine own, inhabited  
 By greater things [...]  
 What wouldst thou think?

*Cain.* I should be proud of thought  
 Which knew such things.

*Lucifer.*       But if that high thought were  
 Link'd to a servile mass of matter, and,  
 Knowing such things, aspiring to such things,  
 And science still beyond them, were chain'd down  
 To the most gross and petty paltry wants,  
 All foul and fulsome, and the very best  
 Of thine enjoyments a sweet degradation,  
 A most enervating and filthy cheat  
 To lure thee on to the renewal of  
 Fresh souls and bodies, all foredoom'd to be  
 As frail, and few so happy –        (Byron, *Cain*, II, i, 43-60)

The aim of this thesis is to pursue the conjunction of two key themes throughout Shelley's works – sexuality and the Gothic – and to appraise the significance of the latter upon the former. Whilst this connection is obviously paraded in Shelley's Gothic novels, images of death, decay, and violence may also be traced throughout his major works, frequently in association with sex and the exploited female body. This study will attempt to assess the reasons why Shelley chose to remain so

close to his literary roots, arguing that there were very cogent philosophical, political, and social reasons behind this long-term adoption of a popular (albeit derided) genre. Furthermore, it will be argued that the Gothic genre itself – in spite of having, in Shelley’s time, acquired negative associations as the domain of hack writers and sensation-hungry readers – not only embodied the anxieties of its own time, but comprises a rich variety of earlier influences and thus reflects upon the more disturbing aspects of the human condition down the ages, which Shelley was well aware of. This is in contrast to the view that the Gothic, in Shelley’s case, reflects more upon the personal anxieties of the author himself, than upon any wider malaise.

Nevertheless, that the persistence of the Gothic hints towards a deep pessimistic strand in Shelley’s works is hard to deny. Writing of *Zastrozzi* – Shelley’s juvenile ‘romance’ of 1810 – David Seed comments ‘throughout this work sexuality is constantly associated with evil and wickedness, to the extent that a psychiatrist has used this text as evidence for the disturbed state of Shelley’s adolescent psyche.’<sup>1</sup> It is the contention of this study that in spite of strenuous efforts throughout his major works and prose arguments to develop the concept of a ‘redeemed’ sexuality, Shelley’s ‘disturbed state’ concerning the sexual act persisted well beyond adolescence. Even in the midst of works which appear to idealise sexuality, Shelley ultimately emerges rather disturbingly close to the camp of Byron’s Lucifer (see quote above). At least as far as the mass of humanity are concerned, for the most part of his career – and concluding definitively on this note with ‘The Triumph of Life’ – he remains deeply sceptical of human ability to overcome the temptations of sensuality, which – he consistently argues – must be avoided or sublimated for the sake of spiritual good, either in simple human relations or for the sake of any conceivable afterlife. His life-long absorption of the opinions and imaginative conceptions of such forbears as Dante, Petrarch, Plato, and Wollstonecraft on the subjects of love, sexuality, and spirituality, whilst enabling him to theoretically depict (and even set out the guidelines for) a fully sexual relationship that could be

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Shelley’s “Gothick” in *St Irvyne* and after,’ in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), p. 41.



prevented from degenerating into unmutual hedonism, otherwise confirmed him in the belief that such complex spiritual trials were beyond the will-power of all but the fortunate few. Indeed, the only notable lover definitely not condemned to ‘The Triumph of Life’ (134-7) is Socrates himself, who escapes in the company of the completely abstinent Jesus Christ, which is hardly encouraging for the average human being and most probably less so for one of Shelley’s infamously turbulent sexual relations.

An early work which perfectly, and none too subtly, illustrates this theme, is ‘Zeinab and Kathema’ (*Esdaile Notebook*, 1813), which depicts the violent separation of a pair of ‘noble savage’ lovers by ‘Christian murderers’ and missionaries. Zeinab – who is Kathema’s ‘betrothed’ – is taken by the invaders and conveyed to England, where ‘To prostitution, crime and woe was [she] driven.’ At some point, understandably resentful, she commits a capital offence (a ‘bold and bloody crime’) out of pure ‘indignation’, and is hanged.<sup>2</sup>

This appears, to all intents and purposes, an illustration of a statement in Shelley’s notes to *Queen Mab* on the subject of women forced into prostitution: ‘Society avenges herself on the criminals of her own creation; she is employed in anathematizing the vice to-day, which yesterday she was the most zealous to teach.’<sup>3</sup> Shelley’s extensive prose commentary to the line ‘Even love is sold’ (*Queen Mab*, V. 189) deconstructs the existing social concept of sexual morality, demonstrating that since ‘Prostitution is the legitimate offspring of marriage and its accompanying errors’ (*PW*, p. 807), and since marriage – now the only openly approved sexual relation (although one can hardly avoid noting the tacit encouragement of prostitution) – is subject to its own ‘system of constraint’ (i.e. arranged, economically determined match-making), the entire social entity is the enemy of love. That remains the fundamental point of Shelley’s social criticism, since reason alone would seem to recommend that empathy should be the basis for functional community, as opposed to a tenuous balance of individual power-struggles: the very form of ‘social Darwinism’ often

<sup>2</sup> *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton and Co., 2002), pp. 3-7, ll. 33, 19, 166, 170, and 168.

<sup>3</sup> *Shelley’s Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), p. 808.

encountered in Gothic novels and, most graphically, in *The Cenci*. In this latter work – Shelley’s great autopsy of a society gone entirely corrupt – barely a trace of empathy is to be found, except in a child (who, we are left to presume, will have it abused and indoctrinated out of its system in subsequent events).

In Freudian terms, the society which Shelley sketches is devoid of a functioning super-ego, since what it presents as ethical and moral safeguards prove completely inadequate to protect the vulnerable from the rampant egos and ids of the empowered. Hence the need for a system based upon empathy/ love, bearing in mind that the empowered seem to have prepared for this contingency, having gone out of their way to impose arbitrary controls on all human relations, and especially on sexual relations, permeating an ideology of egotism and survival from the cradle to the grave: ‘[...] children near their parents tremble now,/ Because they must obey – one rules another, [...] Woman, as the bond-slave, dwells/ Of man, a slave; and life is poisoned in its wells.’ (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3307-15) In Shelley’s view, both marriage and prostitution are deliberately utilised by these decadent societies as forms of institutional slavery, hence his extremely sadistic portrayal of the tyrant’s harem in *Laon and Cythna* (VII, 2857-83), which compounds the two relations in a definitive image of sexuality completely – and institutionally – robbed of all emotional or spiritual attachment.

Another notable feature of ‘Zeinab and Kathema,’ inherited from *Queen Mab* and carried through into later works, is the extreme antipathy of institutionalised Christianity to all forms of sexuality which do not fall under its strict auspices, hence their separation of a couple ‘betrothed’ by the laws of a non-Christian religion. The priests later depicted by Shelley in *Laon and Cythna*, and in ‘Rosalind and Helen’ come across as mere arbitrary sadists, but in *The Cenci* and the prose fragment ‘On Christianity’ (1817) we see his view clearly: that religion, like family and sexual relationships, has been hijacked by the forces of ‘rugged individualism’ and is likewise being used to emphasise to each human being their spiritual isolation, in contradiction to its natural purpose.

We may recall George Orwell's vision of a society based on the complete breakdown of empathy, in the words of the inquisitor from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The old civilisations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. [...] We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. [...] The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm.<sup>4</sup>

Shelley's visions of dystopian rule – Jupiter's Earth, Othman's Islam, and the Italy of *The Cenci* – are similar insofar as the emotional ties of human relationships have been severely damaged or dissolved in the interests of fear-based monolithic power, but the extremely patriarchal nature of Shelley's regimes introduces a persistent strain of sensual degeneration not present in Orwell's sterile entity. One gets the distinct impression, also present in Wollstonecraft's writings, that late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century society is being governed for the interests of rapists and sadists, or at the very least a culture of libertinism which seeks to deny female intellectual autonomy in order to safeguard its own sexual 'privileges': a scheme which Rousseau rather shamelessly lays out in *Émile*, book V, much to Wollstonecraft's indignation and Shelley's disappointment, as will be seen.

In the closing scenes of 'Zeinab and Kathema,' the latter discovers his betrothed's putrefying corpse swinging on a gibbet: society's hypocritical vengeance on the 'criminal' of its 'own creation'. Despondent, he hangs himself alongside her, thus participating in a trope often encountered in the Gothic: the image of the lover embracing the dead beloved and/ or entering their grave, despairingly invoked at the point where faith in a better future existence evidently wavers or

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<sup>4</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 279-80.

breaks down, and an eternal physical union – even mutual decomposition<sup>5</sup> – suddenly becomes desirable; or even, as Kathema believes, ‘essential’. As he puts it, “‘My love! I will be like to thee,/ A mouldering carcase or a spirit blest,/ With thee corruption’s prey, or Heaven’s happy guest.’”

(154-6) Human society, or possibly treacherous innate desires (Shelley, unlike the anti-social Rousseau, is unsure where the original blame should lie) have effected a catastrophic emotional and spiritual alienation of human beings. Furthermore, the very desire for empathic relations being interpreted as a sign of male weakness in this patriarchal power economy, the only obvious recourse for a lover such as Kathema – who has the fortune, against all the odds, to meet his soul-mate, only to lose her violently – is despair and self-destruction.

Variations of this desperate and implicitly necrophiliac need for the body are prominent in *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* (on a more surreal note, where the protagonists attempt to construct a ‘reanimated’ female cadaver), Edgar Allan Poe’s tales (e.g. ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ ‘Ligeia,’ and ‘Morella’), *Zofloya* (which inspired Shelley’s own early Gothic dabblings), and in several of Shelley’s works. In ‘Zeinab and Kathema’, the ambiguous hopes expressed in Kathema’s last words (“‘I will be like to thee,/ A mouldering carcase or a spirit blest’”) dignify his death somewhat, since he retains some faith in spiritual existence. His readiness to accept a less exalted condition (to say the least) is, however, an implicit sign of some decadence in his supposedly Arcadian love-affair. As in the aforementioned works, it stands testimony to the great extent to which physical sexuality, with the aid of society, has swamped and usurped the (ideally) spiritual affinity of love. In *Zastrozzi*, ‘Invocation to Misery,’ *Laon and Cythna*, and *Epipsychidion*, the spiritually corrosive effects of the consequent sensual ‘necessity’ become all too apparent.

I shall pursue this idea through several of Shelley’s best known longer works and a few of lesser note, but of equal or greater morbidity such as *Zastrozzi* and ‘Invocation to Misery’. For amidst well-known episodes of ecstatic sexual apotheosis in works such as ‘Alastor’, *Laon and*

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<sup>5</sup> As Heathcliff expresses it: ‘[...] dissolving with her, and being more happy still!’ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994; first published 1847), p. 241.

*Cythna*, and *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley depicts an equal or greater number of purely revolting sexual episodes worthy of Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis or Charlotte ‘Rosa Matilda’ Dacre. This indicates a profound survival of Gothic themes and registers even to the very highest points of his literary maturity.<sup>6</sup> *The Cenci* is, indeed, for all of its pseudo-Elizabethan/ Jacobean trappings, a Gothic play, and the phantom-infested nightmare landscape of ‘The Triumph of Life’ is at no pains to reject the genre (although Shelley himself, for the sake of his literary credibility, once attempted to, as shall presently be seen). Gothic representations of sexuality as patriarchal sado-masochism, such as Shelley absorbed in his youth, evidently proved too close to his perception of the actual human condition to suffer rejection.

My first chapter focuses upon Shelley’s early Gothic works and his influences: chiefly ‘Monk’ Lewis<sup>7</sup> and Dacre, but also his incipient interest in Plato. Ideas from the *Phaedo* are plainly apparent in Shelley’s writing from at least as early as 1811, and even *Zastrozzi* is engaged in constructing – albeit in very vague terms – a dichotomy between spiritually fulfilling ‘intellectual beauty’ and degenerative, self-destructive lust. The influence of Lewis and Dacre on Shelley’s juvenile period has long been understood, as Curt R. Zimankys clarified in 1978:

The extent of Shelley’s borrowings from Lewis raises the question of whether [*The*

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<sup>6</sup> See Stephen C. Behrendt’s introduction to, *ZSI*, pp. vii-xxiii:

[...] in these early works Shelley plants the seeds of liberal and humanitarian ideas that would reach their fruition in later, more famous works: notions of the necessity for selfless love and integration, of the poisonous nature of selfishness and revenge as motives for human activity, of liberty in opposition to the tyranny of Custom and received ideas. Shelley would return again and again in his brief but spectacular career to both the themes and the techniques with which we see him experimenting in *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne*. Though he turned away from the Gothic novel as he became involved in other, more ambitious literary, political, and social projects, Shelley never entirely abandoned the Gothic [...]. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

<sup>7</sup> Behrendt offers a convincing summary of Shelley’s early interest in Lewis, and its place in his wider and mature interests:

There is in Shelley’s novels also a strong strain of Matthew Lewis, not only in the appropriation of the name Matilda [...] but in other resemblances as well. Lewis’s lustful monk Ambrosio and his demonic nun Matilda, for instance, would have appealed to Shelley, whose antipathy to orthodox Christianity generally was strong. (p. xiv)

It is no mere coincidence that *Zastrozzi*’s view of religion (‘false, foolish, and vulgar prejudices’) so nearly approximates Shelley’s own in 1810; nor is it coincidental that *Zastrozzi* in many ways prefigures the flawed Satan-Prometheus figure Shelley would later ‘redeem’ [...]. (p. xvi)

*Monk*] influenced not only specific passages of *The Wandering Jew* but also its plot, especially since we know the plots of *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* [...] largely derive from the plot of Charlotte Dacre's work in the same genre, *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806).<sup>8</sup>

[...] the young Shelley was thoroughly enamoured of the kind of pastiche we find in *The Wandering Jew*, as evidenced by how closely his two novels [...] follow Dacre's *Zofloya* and by his use of Lewis's phrase "thou art mine, and I am thine" in another place, "Ghastha, or the Avenging Demon!!!" (ll. 93-96). (ibid. p. 607)

Phraseology aside, 'Ghastha' is in fact a graphic and cynical re-telling of Lewis's 'Bleeding Nun' episode from *The Monk*, and an excellent early demonstration of Shelley's approach to the Gothic genre, which, in spirit, is closer to Dacre's than Lewis's: good and bad characters (by conventional social standards) alike work towards mutual destruction, with no happy endings thrown in to counteract the overall impression of society and the human spirit in a state of terminal corruption (i.e. the marriages at the end of *The Monk*). Whilst *The Cenci* would finally offer an explicit depiction of a whole society run along the lines of a dysfunctional psyche – not a world away from *The Monk*'s corrupt theocracy – Shelley's early Gothic characters nearly all embody the same self-punishing egotistic turmoil, the 'heroes' being as deeply flawed as the 'villains.'

Jerrold E. Hogle's analysis of the early novels determines that their real interest (as precursors of Shelley's mature works) lies in their psychological structures. Their actual narrative structures he dismisses as 'a mass of blunders':<sup>9</sup>

Though the excesses of the early Shelley's style are laughable, its redundancy points to a continual crisis of soul that circumstances may unleash but cannot justify on their

<sup>8</sup> Curt R. Zimansky, 'Shelley's *Wandering Jew*: Some Borrowings from Lewis and Radcliffe', *Studies in English Literature*, 18 (1978), pp. 597-609 (p. 606).

<sup>9</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Shelley's Fiction: The "Steam of Fate"', *Keats-ShelleyJournal*, 30 (1981), pp. 78-99 (p. 78).

own. Linear causality is attempted throughout, yet it keeps giving way to portraits of a constant schism at the center, a mental trauma that transcends perception, motivation, time, and physical space.

*Zastrozzi*, in fact, makes use of the confrontations of separate people only to deal with a number of minds confronting similar feelings. *Zastrozzi* and *Verezzi* are more engaged in struggles within than they are at war with each other [...] Each character sets up the other as an opponent, in fact, only as each also confronts the other as a *Doppelgänger* of his own mental chaos. Each incorporates the darkening veils of his psyche within a physical counterpart as a way of giving perceivable form to the shadowy passions that fester inside the soul. And when these emotions actually surface, it is they and not their embodiments that really destroy their owners. (ibid. p. 84)

Hogle's emphasis on doubling and psychodrama raises two interesting and oft-debated aspects of the Gothic, as he acknowledges with reference to *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *Frankenstein*, and Shelley's later use of such a structure in *Prometheus Unbound* (pp. 93-7). In *The Cenci*, it may be observed how Shelley extends the *Doppelgänger* principle, depicting an entire social entity that mirrors the self-destructive psyches of his protagonists. This is Shelley's most despairing portrait of a social order, free from supernatural elements yet still the most clearly Gothic of his mature works. The sexual excesses of Lewis's and Dacre's antiheroes are here affirmations of a status quo badly in need of reformation. Shelley creates a pre-Freudian, pre-Orwellian vision of an anti-society ironically held together by forces of disintegration: corruption, distrust, guilt, and sexual exploitation. Count Cenci himself takes to extremes misguided patriarchal conventions, such as are advocated by Rousseau and reviled by Wollstonecraft as sophistical justifications of egotism.

Considering egotism more fully, I progress in chapter three to the figure of the vampire. This Gothic staple appears throughout Romantic works (from Goethe, through Coleridge, Southey,

Byron, Polidori and Mary Shelley) as a signifier of spiritual decay, the breakdown of human sympathy, and the insidious effects of both (particularly where related to sexual relationships). Shelley's allegorical use of such a being is observed 'Invocation to Misery' – a straightforward descent into a black 'grave' of egotism – and more ambiguously in 'Alastor', possibly drawing on Dante's dream of the siren in the *Purgatorio*.

Chapter four deals with the theme of incest: a device deployed by Lewis and Radcliffe to catalyse the descent of their egotistic villains into greater depths of self-contempt. Shelley's awareness of its Gothic cadences is clearly indicated in *The Cenci*, but his apparent efforts to 'redeem' incest in earlier works are a complex issue. I shall be arguing that while Shelley demonstrates sympathy with incestuous couples as a matter of political principle – the same he also demonstrates in refusing to condemn (as was the contemporary practice) the homosexuality of Plato's circle – he by no means considers sibling incest as inherently more free from the dangers of degenerate sensuality than any other sexual relationship.

In chapter five I turn to 'The Triumph of Life', to witness the Gothic in its full force at the very close of Shelley's career. I shall also examine Shelley's changing perception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, his enthusiasm for *La Nouvelle Héloïse* set against the uncompromisingly patriarchal sexual ethics of *Émile*, and Shelley's distaste for the *Confessions* (revealing the author's personal sexual ethics to be even more beyond the pale than Wollstonecraft had realised). As depicted in Shelley's *danse macabre*, the fall of Rousseau exemplifies the overall pessimistic theme of the work as it stands:<sup>10</sup> the improbability of all but the most saintly of human beings being able, at the last, to definitively resist the sadomasochistic lure of the flesh and mortality. In a distinct contrast to 'Alastor', we now see a Dantean protagonist rushing from his Beatrice in fear and embracing the destructive sensuality of the 'siren' Life.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bearing in mind that, had Shelley completed it, a change of tone was always possible.

<sup>11</sup> For a similarly malevolent and sensually degenerate personification of Life, see William Langland, *Piers the Ploughman*, trans. J. F. Goodridge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), XX, pp. 249-50. Under the influence of Antichrist, Life has deserted Holy Church:

So life and his lover Fortune led a gay life together, and at last begot in their glory a lazy urchin called



Finally, I turn to two works in which the Gothic is conspicuously subdued, although it cannot be prevented from rearing its head from time to time. In *Epipsychidion*, it does so with catastrophic consequences. The failure of Shelley's poet-protagonist to attain spiritual grace through human love, in spite of a vast network of pseudo-Dantean rhetoric, merits close examination: especially in light of the similar rhetorical flights of the lover Saint-Preux in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, whose protestations of spiritually exalted love are consistently belied by his sexual frustration and consequent misdemeanours, as his beloved (Julie) is forced into repeatedly reminding him. A similar function falls to Petrarch's Laura in *The Triumph of Death*, whose lover's ardency likewise proves too egotistic and sensual to earn heavenly commendations. Shelley draws upon this *Triumph* in *Adonais* where he depicts the humiliation of Death – able to claim the body of the exalted beloved figure, but not, ultimately, the spirit, which somehow endures to lead the despairing mourner to glory. That Shelley – unlike Dante – chooses a fellow male poet as his spiritual guiding light is of considerable interest, and suggests that the basically triumphant ending of *Adonais* nevertheless holds one note of weary resignation: the impossibility of completely purging egotism and sensuality from heterosexual relations, hence the poet's 'appropriation' of a purely intellectual soul-mate.

In writing this study, I have been significantly inspired by the work of Teddi Chichester Bonca, whose psychosexual studies of Shelley's works accord in many particulars with my own arguments. For example, I am broadly in agreement with her assessment of Shelley's extreme scepticism concerning the contemporary conventions of masculinity: in particular, the aforementioned and accepted aristocratic culture of libertinism. I also unreservedly accept her view that Shelley considered the contemporary 'feminine' virtues of compassion and selfless devotion to

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Sloth, who made great mischief. He grew with amazing speed and soon came of age, when he married a drab from the brothels called Despair. [...] Then Old Age seized the sword of Good Hope and prepared himself in all haste. And very soon he drove off Despair, and was grappling with Life himself. [...] 'Now I see,' said Life, 'that neither Medicine nor Surgery can do anything against Death.' Yet still hoping to recover his health, he took Good Heart, and rode away to the city of Revel, a rich and merry place, sometimes known as Comfort-in-Company.

be much more befitting to both genders than ‘male’ egotism, the ultimate ideal being a state of thoroughly passive, Christ-like sensibility. ‘Christ’s “womanly” mildness, “amiability,” and passivity strongly appealed to Shelley,’<sup>12</sup> who (as shall be seen) entertained a rather one-sided and selective opinion of Jesus. I have, however, sought to avoid the strongly biographical approach of Bonca – not because I consider it invalid, but because at present I prefer to suppose that Shelley composed a body of work in which at most, if not at all times, purely personal considerations are demoted in the interests of communication and relevance. Thus, I choose to interpret ‘Alastor’ and *Epipsychidion* as presentations of a type, and of a vice, rather than veiled narcissistic reveries, as (I believe) is indicated in Shelley’s clear efforts – via the prose prefaces of both these works – to dissociate author from character.

Notwithstanding Shelley’s preference for conventionally ‘feminine’ virtues, I have sought to avoid depicting him as a gender essentialist:<sup>13</sup> a conclusion which one might easily draw from *Laon and Cythna*, but which I do not believe is ultimately borne out by any of his works. Even *Laon and Cythna*, with its highly-idealised (and socially anomalous) feminine protagonist, does not portray women as angelic and men as degenerate by default of nature, leading one to conclude along with Mary Wollstonecraft that the aforementioned gender stereotypes are exactly that and nothing more. With this view in mind, it is hardly surprising that in the greater extent of Shelley’s *oeuvre*, the

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<sup>12</sup> Teddi Chichester Bonca, *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love - Narcissism, Sacrifice and Sorority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, pp. 89-90:

Like many theorists of his own and of our day, Shelley credited women with “permeable” ego boundaries and a fluidity of identity that would enable them to dispense more readily than men with the notion of a discrete, rigidly defined self. In compelling heroes such as Laon, Prometheus, and the voluble speaker of *Epipsychidion* to mirror the femininity of their supposedly “second” selves, the poet distances his surrogates from (masculine) conceptions of personal autonomy, fixed gender, and static identity, from the principle of Self that Shelley’s dangerously virile, monomaniacal, and “self-closed” *Doppelgänger* embody.

My intention is to carry this argument in a different direction from Bonca’s analysis of Shelley’s ‘Imaginative Transsexualism’ (ibid., p. 107), working from the assumption that Shelley did not believe that the contemporary division of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes was the work of nature. On the contrary, and especially in *Laon and Cythna* (which Bonca’s transsexualism argument focuses upon), Shelley is also very much concerned to present the artificial social constraints and stereotypes which have systematically placed women in the role of victims and men as violently competing sadists.

perfect sensibility of the ‘feminized Christ’<sup>14</sup> cannot be any more comfortably situated in female characters than in male characters.

On the subject of corrupt and repulsive representations of sexuality, I have found the work of Nora Crook and Derek Guiton in *Shelley’s Venomed Melody* to be invaluable.<sup>15</sup> Their study of the imagery of venereal disease in Shelley’s works ranges from the very blatant ravings of Count Cenci (who clearly intends to infect his daughter with his ailments, born of a lifetime’s dedicated degeneracy) to the subtler, more insidious decay of the poet in ‘Alastor’, but with especial focus upon the encounter with the ‘false one’ in *Epipsychidion* (256-66), a very significant passage which I examine at length in my final chapter. The sordid pathological dimension of works such as *The Cenci*, *Epipsychidion*, and even *Prometheus Unbound*<sup>16</sup> serves as a correlative for the deadly spiritual contamination that a sadistic or sensualistic lover purposes to inflict upon their ‘beloved;’ intentionally (as in *The Cenci* and Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which I shall examine together in chapter two); incidentally (as in the case of the average Gothic sadist such as Matilda from *Zastrozzi*); or inadvertently, with deluded ‘good’ intentions (such as Laon, Dante’s Paolo and Francesca,<sup>17</sup> Rousseau’s Saint-Preux, and, as I believe, the lover of *Epipsychidion*).

With this imagery of venereal infection, Shelley establishes a horrible similitude between his condemnation of disease-spreading prostitution, and that of all forms of sexuality which resemble it, in that they elevate the sensual experience over the empathic, and encourage the alienation and victimisation enshrined by the prevailing stereotypes. The metaphor of syphilitic decay is also employed to lend a stark and sordid immediacy to the somewhat hackneyed devices of the Gothic genre, affording a contemporary ‘living example’ of vampire-like existence<sup>18</sup> and ‘premature

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> Nora Crook and Derek Guiton, *Shelley’s Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, pp. 196-7:

Jupiter hopes to keep down the hydra-headed monster of insurrection with a hydra-headed monster of his own production, a super-syphilis more terrible than any of his other plagues, which will brutalise man into a condition of permanent slavery. [...] With Prometheus’ unbinding, health is transmitted to Earth by physical contact with him and she is rejuvenated. He is the regenerative life-force, reversing the process by which sexual diseases are transmitted from person to person.

<sup>17</sup> See Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto V.

<sup>18</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 147-8: ‘And the wretch crept, a vampire among men,/ Infecting all with his own

decomposition' (or as Coleridge might have put it, Life-in-Death): matters I shall explore fully in chapter three.

On the same subject, I am indebted to Stuart Curran's identification of the syphilitic imagery in *The Cenci*, in his extensive analysis,<sup>19</sup> which has been of considerable general influence on my own analysis of that play (largely in chapter two). I have been particularly inspired by his characterisation of Count Cenci as a 'perverse Platonist,'<sup>20</sup> which I have taken as the starting-point for my own detailed breakdown of Shelley's exemplary Gothic anti-hero and his motivations. I have, however, chosen not to concur with Curran's fatalistic assessment of Beatrice Cenci, which I am unable to reconcile with Shelley's emphasis on free will in the Preface to *The Cenci*.<sup>21</sup>

Also of considerable influence on the matters of death and sexuality has been William Ulmer's deconstructive study.<sup>22</sup> Although my work has not at any point consciously adopted Ulmer's theoretical approach,<sup>23</sup> I have nevertheless frequently taken my cue from his analyses of

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hideous ill.'

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970). See p. 92, n. 12 in particular.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> *PP*, p. 240:

Undoubtedly, no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love. Revenge, retaliation, atonement, are pernicious mistakes. If Beatrice had thought in this manner she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character [...].

See *Scorpions Ringed with Fire*, pp. 93-4, which appears to stand in contradiction to this:

Having endured Cenci's tyranny, Beatrice cannot endure his sexual assault. Always she has been able to insulate herself from her father's evil by standing against him. But this physical subjugation obliterates that relationship, forcing upon Beatrice an inextricable involvement with all that she loathes.

Symbolically, she is made a part of the very evil she has so long opposed. [...] To accept this is to fall helpless to his will, and that way is chaos. Thus, Beatrice asks retribution – not mere vengeance, but the re-establishment of moral values through the destruction of an evil man.

<sup>22</sup> William Ulmer, *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup>

The mutual dependence of antitheses in Shelley leaves the ideal at once intact and inaccessible. Shelley's idealism serves as the vehicle of his prophetic optimism, but also sanctions pessimism by wedding the aspirations of his poems to the ultimate. [...] As the mode of metaphor in its inadequacy to presence, allegory both disclaims and recuperates Shelley's figures of likeness. Yet the recuperations finally prove exhaustible. The allegorical subplot of Shelley's poetry gradually exposes the contradictions of his metaphorical idealism, its willed fictions and covert violence. With that exposure, Shelley's poems accept death as the telos of desire and gravitate increasingly toward a visionary despair. (p. 18)

My personal stance has been to avoid accusing Shelley of any such masochistic embracing of despair, at least in his personal voice (since I consider the *Epipsychidion* lover to be a character), with the single exception of the

‘desire-as-violence’ (p. 60): particularly in relation to such representations of patriarchy and sadism as the nightmare-sequence of Laon and Cythna (Canto III, 1324-41) and the whole of *The Cenci*. Ulmer identifies the latter work as part of Shelley’s continuing project, inherited from Wollstonecraft, to expose the inherent corruption in contemporary gender politics: ‘Only the representation of rape could leave spectators suitably horrified by the injustices of entrenched patriarchal privilege.’ (p. 124) In this sense, the off-stage yet horrific rape of Beatrice Cenci can be seen as a rather more effective sequel to the didactically-reported, stylised rape of Cythna (*Laon and Cythna*, Canto VII, 2866-83).

In a somewhat more critical sense, I have been inspired by Milton Wilson’s Christian assessment of *Epipsychidion*.<sup>24</sup>

Any Christian theologian could recognize at sight all the approaches along which Shelley tries to define the status of Emily. [...] Dante’s Beatrice is possible because Dante’s Platonism has been transformed by his Christianity. The timeless can enter time for Dante and not simply be degraded by it. Shelley’s Platonic frame of reference, however, denies such interpretation. In the plain prose of Shelley’s letters, Emily can only illustrate the error of “seeking in a mortal image what is perhaps eternal” [...] In spite of himself Shelley touches the possibility that Eternity may be fulfilled in Time. He touches it and moves back. (p. 230)

I find the basic premise of this – that the *Epipsychidion* lover is directly representative of Shelley himself – unlikely, in view of the authorial ‘distancing’ at work in the poem’s Preface. More

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fragment ‘Invocation to Misery’ (which I examine in chapter III). The fact that Shelley, after attempting to expand this grim confessional poem to include some more political themes, finally rejected it (it was published posthumously, as a fragment), I believe strengthens the argument that Shelley was always concerned that his works (published, at all events) should be relevant and salutary.

<sup>24</sup> Milton Wilson, *Shelley’s Later Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957).

in view of the arguments in *Adonais*<sup>25</sup> than any statements of the Epipsychidion lover (who, I intend to show, is a most unreliable source), the point that Shelley's Platonism led him to a very sharp dualism between the physical and spiritual existence – so much in favour of that latter that simply 'To be born is to be degraded'<sup>26</sup> – is well taken. However, I do believe there is considerable danger in characterising the mature Shelley as so pro-Plato as to render him virtually anti-Christ (bearing in mind that the two are not even mutually exclusive). We can hardly overlook that Plato, notwithstanding Shelley's great admiration for his works, finishes up chained in 'The Triumph of Life'; whereas Christ, notwithstanding the many abuses and crimes of the Christian churches which Shelley was always keen to draw attention to, does not. Furthermore, with its closing reference to Dante<sup>27</sup> (who, it is implied, may also have escaped the 'The Triumph of Life') and its general resemblance to a medieval dream-vision – the riotous procession of worldly life bearing quite a similitude to Langland's 'plain full of people'<sup>28</sup> – one might conclude that for all Shelley's

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Adonais*, 352-7:

He has outsoared the shadow of our night;  
 Envy and calumny and hate and pain,  
 And that unrest which men miscall delight,  
 Can touch him not and torture not again;  
 From the contagion of the world's slow stain  
 He is secure [...]

<sup>26</sup> *Shelley's Later Poetry*, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Triumph of Life', 472-6: '[...] him who from the lowest depths of Hell./ Through every Paradise and through all glory,/ Love led serene, and who returned to tell/ "In words of hate and awe; the wondrous story/ How all things are transfigured except Love [...].'

<sup>28</sup> *Piers the Ploughman*, pp. 25-31:

And I dreamt a marvellous dream: I was in a wilderness, [...] and looking Eastwards I saw a tower high up against the sun, [...] and far beneath it was a great gulf, with a dungeon in it, [Heaven and Hell] [...] between the tower and the gulf I saw a smooth plain, thronged with all kinds of people, high and low together, moving busily about their worldly affairs.

Some laboured at ploughing and sowing, with no time for pleasure, sweating to produce food for the gluttons to waste. Others spent their lives in vanity, parading themselves in a show of fine clothes. But many, out of love for our Lord and in the hope of Heaven, led strict lives devoted to prayer and penance – for such are the hermits and anchorites who stay in their cells, and are not forever hankering to roam about, and pamper their bodies with sensual pleasures. [...]

And there were tramps and beggars hastening on their rounds, [...] They lived by their wits, and fought over their ale – for God knows, they go to bed glutted with food and drink, [...] and get up with foul language and filthy talk; and all day long, Sleep and shabby Sloth are at their heels. [...]

I saw many more in this great concourse of people, [...] barons, burgesses, and peasants; bakers, brewers, and butchers; linen-weavers and tailors, tinkers and toll-collectors, masons and miners and many other tradesfolk. And all kinds of labourers suddenly appeared – shoddy workmen, who would while away their hours with bawdy songs [...] while cooks with their boys cried 'Hot pies! Hot pies! Fat pigs and geese! Come and eat!' and inn-keepers were bawling, 'White wine! Red wine! Gascon and Spanish! Wash down your meat with the finest Rhenish!'

continuing hatred of the history of organised religion,<sup>29</sup> the note he closes on is nevertheless as close to conventional Christianity as he ever came (not counting the overblown parodies of the disingenuous narrator in *Zastrozzi*).

I therefore feel that there are considerable grounds for a revision and expansion of Wilson's statements. Although it may be true that Shelley considered that moral and spiritual degradation was an immense risk for everyone born into the world, I am inclined to think that he consistently believed that the likelihood of such degradation was always under the direct influence of the condition of culture and society, as opposed to a foregone conclusion, because creation per se was corrupt. I believe this is well supported in the resolution of *Prometheus Unbound*, where the collapse of the corrupt social superstructure restores the 'health' of the physical world, although it does not abolish death (III, ii, 105-14).

The chief spiritual danger Shelley identifies in the state of things is a Christian and Platonic commonplace: worldly society's encouragement of an individualistic, sensualistic existence which leaves its members afraid of, and unprepared for the inevitable change of state, which could very well involve loss of both identity and pleasures. Thus, the need to foster the capacity of love, and keep the focus firmly away from sexuality<sup>30</sup> since the desire to accrue sensual pleasures is self-love, pure and simple. Salutory love is thus defined as the widest possible state of empathy, which makes social reform very urgent indeed, since empathy (as Dante demonstrates throughout the *Commedia*)

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Note Langland's emphasis on the cacophonous nature of this world-plain: the brawling and swearing of the (false) beggars, the dirty songs of the workmen, the cries of the tradesmen, and also (not quoted) the lies of false preachers (such as friars and a pardoner) and insincere pilgrims, the 'filth' spoken as entertainment by 'babblers and vulgar jesters' (p. 26), and the meaningless 'gabbling' of priests who have gone into 'the service of lords and ladies' (p. 27). A similarly disorganised, dysfunctional, individualistic excuse for a community, with much noise and precious little communication, is to be found in Dante's Hell. 'The Triumph of Life' is very consciously a late member of this (notably Christian) genre.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Triumph of Life', 288-92: '[...] Gregory and John and men divine/ Who rose like shadows between Man and god/ Till that eclipse, still hanging under Heaven,/ Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode/ For the true Sun it quenched.'

<sup>30</sup> This is clearly stated in 'A Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love.' See James A Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), p. 410: '[...] the perfection of intercourse consisting, not perhaps in a total annihilation of the instinctive sense, but in the reducing it to as minute a proportion as possible, compared with those higher faculties of our nature, from which it[s] derives a value.'

does not flourish easily in a society which is little better than a papered-over anarchy. This love, in a process also laid out by Plato in *The Symposium*, naturally progresses to a universal love for the whole of creation. Platonic enlightenment and Christian grace are here well met, and whoever would aspire to them must sincerely transfer their desires from the finite, self-centred, sensual, and transient. Both Dante and Plato make this point clear: Paolo and Francesca of the *Inferno* are by no means malicious sinners, but nor do they aspire to anything beyond the bodily and mortal, hence their descent to the circle of the lustful, tossed eternally in a black wind (exemplifying the pointless, clamorous tumult of activity which pervades Dante's Hell). In the *Phaedo*, sensual people who are afraid to change their state at death are doomed to haunt their own sepulchres.<sup>31</sup> 'The Triumph of Life' is a grim demonstration of the immense difficulty involved in attempting to become sincerely enthusiastic about the attainment of spiritual grace which needs must, sooner or later, entail a commitment to abandon the sensual, as I shall argue at length in chapter five.

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Resistance to the long-standing view of Shelley as a poet of narcissistic reverie (after the fashion of Rousseau and Wordsworth)<sup>32</sup> has been frequently encountered in critical discourse since Carlos

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated with an introduction by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), pp. 133-4. Further confirmation that this pre-Christian fable is by no means incompatible with Christian-authored didacticism is provided by Milton's reference to this passage in *Comus*, 463-75:

[...] when lust  
 By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,  
 But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,  
 Lets in defilement to the inward parts,  
 The soul grows clotted by contagion,  
 Embodies, and imbrutes, till she quite lose  
 The divine property of her first being.  
 Such are those thick and gloomy shadows damp  
 Oft seen in charnel-vaults, and sepulchres  
 Lingering, and sitting by a new-made grave,  
 As loath to leave the body that it loved,  
 And linked itself by carnal sensuality  
 To a degenerate and degraded state.

<sup>32</sup> Edward E Bostetter, 'Shelley and the Mutinous Flesh.', in *Shelley: Modern Judgements*, ed. R. B. Woodings (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 240-52.

[...] Shelley sought the ultimate union by means of reverie; the result was that by the nature of poetry and his own personality the means became an end in itself. He became absorbed in the sensuous reverie for its own sake and was never able to move beyond it in poetic detail. (p. 246)



Baker's denouncing of 'the literalists'.<sup>33</sup> There are numerous recent examples of commentators stressing Shelley's conscious poetic skill, as opposed to his alleged rhapsodic or neurotic flights of ego. Examining *Epipsychidion* – a work which has even recently persisted in retaining a reputation as an example of Shelley at his most unrestrained and confessional – Tatsuo Tokoo reaches a dramatically different conclusion: '[...] I was led to the conviction that in this most characteristic of his poems Shelley was not so much of a rapturous lyricist as has often been assumed but rather a highly conscious artist.'<sup>34</sup> Kevin Binfield draws attention to Shelley's abilities as a conscious and calculating rhetorician in his comments on the prose fragment, 'The Coliseum':<sup>35</sup>

['The Coliseum'] illustrates Shelley's formulation of a response to the demoralizing threat of history. That threat is the moral and psychological danger, identified by Lord Byron in Canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, that history already has unfolded to reveal the contemptible corruption and folly of human nature, and that one can do little but to curse in frustration amid its material remains. [...] Shelley proposes a rhetorical solution to the problem of history, identifying benevolent impulses in human minds joined by an intergenerational and familial interest and by the combined workings of imagination and rhetoric.

(p. 125)

The ability to overcome the fallen human state [...] resides in the identification of the human body with the earth from which it springs and to which it returns, a phenomenon we see in the return of the Colosseum to the state of nature. [...] Above all, it resides in a rhetorical, social, imagination that permits a link between

<sup>33</sup> In *Shelley's Major Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1948). See pp. 231-2 on biographical interpretations of *Epipsychidion*.

<sup>34</sup> Tatsuo Tokoo, 'The Composition of *Epipsychidion*: Some Manuscript Evidence', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 42 (1993), pp. 97-103 (p. 103).

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Binfield, '“May they be divided never”: Ethics, History, and the Rhetorical Imagination in Shelley's “The Coliseum”', in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 46 (1997), pp. 125-47.

generations, between parent and child [...] and an experience upon which, contrary to critical protestations about the futility masked by the Romantic ideology, material action can be based. (pp. 146-7)

The definition of Shelley as a decidedly urbane artist has even been extended as far back as his juvenile Gothic period. Re-evaluating his 1811 novel *St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian*, Peter Finch determines the work to be

[...] a much more accomplished and intriguing textual performance than has hitherto been supposed. [...] *St. Irvyne* may indeed be “juvenile,” in that it sees the youthful Shelley adopting and discarding narrative modes as part of a recognizable process of experimentation and development; yet it also reveals him, even this early in his career, as an accomplished interrogator and subtle unbinder of existing regimes of literary discourse [...].<sup>36</sup>

Arguments to the contrary are, however, still prevalent, suggesting Shelley to have been principally an author of subjectivity. Bonca’s extensive study of Shelley’s psychosexuality notably defines itself as responding to a ‘recent’ school of readers (‘feminist critics in particular’) who define Shelley as a ‘delirious egotist, or “narcissist,” [...] Sexist as well as self involved [...].’<sup>37</sup> Bonca herself asserts the prevalence of ‘undeniably narcissistic tendencies in Shelley’s psyche’<sup>38</sup> and examines his works in light of these, as well as his aforementioned ‘imaginative transsexualism.’ Paul Vatalaro similarly, and contemporaneously, writes of the ‘psychological tension’<sup>39</sup> in Shelley’s writings, based upon a conflicted desire of submitting to the feminine (if not

<sup>36</sup> Peter Finch, ‘Monstrous Inheritance: The Sexual Politics of Genre in Shelley’s *St. Irvyne*’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 48 (1999), pp. 35-68 (pp. 36-7).

<sup>37</sup> *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Semiotic Echoes in Percy Shelley’s Poems to Jane Williams.’ in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 48 (1999), pp. 69-89 (p. 89).

explicitly, as in Bonca's theory, somehow becoming feminine):

In anticipation of Julia Kristeva, Shelley imagined that the intimacy, nourishment and music which inform the relationship shared by a mother and her infant serve as alternatives to the obligation, legality and language (hence, distance) which characterize most relationships in the adult world. Shelley's yearning to return to this world by way of some feminine-maternal figure, though, was challenged by an equally powerful urge to avoid the risk of seeing his subjectivity and autonomy dissolved. The necessary consequence, he believed, of submitting oneself to the control of feminine-maternal power.<sup>40</sup>

Notwithstanding such strongly-argued views, as I have stated, I have chosen not to adopt a strongly biographical angle, nor to depict Shelley as the writer of a personal obsession and idealisation of womanhood,<sup>41</sup> preferring to concentrate on his conscious artistry and deliberate rhetoric. I have made one significant exception, in stressing the largely consistent pessimism of the poet: notwithstanding Shelley's clear and impressive efforts to formulate a 'redeemed' spiritually-reinforced sexuality capable of entirely supplanting the soul-rotting egotistic lust commonly accepted as love (and epitomised in the Gothic genre), his statements of confidence in a widespread redemption are few and far between. Particularly when compared to his depictions of a world which, to all intents and purposes, appears to be an irredeemable dystopia: *Laon and Cythna*, *The Cenci*, *Adonais* and 'The Triumph of Life' (among others) stand in grim, sordid, and overwhelming

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> The argument that Shelley idealised women (under existing contemporary conditions, at all events) is contested by Nathaniel Brown in *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 179-80:

Shelley [...] believed in women as equals, or as potential equals. He always dealt with both men and women in terms of their best selves, encouraging them to live up to the implied compliment. [...] What appealed most to Shelley in the relations of the sexes was plainly the possibility of full intellectual companionship. [...] it is foolish to talk in terms of sexual superiority. Both sexes should work toward the ideal of human perfectibility, with men assisting women, even if the goal itself can never be fully attained.

contrast to the abstract, otherworldly apotheosis of *Prometheus Unbound* and the optimistic speculations on erotic love of the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks’ (which depend upon, rather than conduce to the moral improvement of the species). Nathaniel Brown argues that:

*Prometheus Unbound* represents the high watermark in Shelley’s celebration of sex. Never again would he reach such a pitch of ecstatic and uninhibited sensuality. [...] he came increasingly to view the claims of the body as a distracting nuisance, even as a precarious obstacle in the way of the higher claims of the spirit.<sup>42</sup>

Bearing in mind that Shelley’s pessimism with regard to sensuality is a highly visible component of his oeuvre from his early Gothic works, and regularly surfaces throughout his career with a high point in *The Cenci*, one might well conclude that *Prometheus Unbound* was an unmatched exception: the only one of his works, indeed, in which wholesome sexuality becomes widely available to the human race, as opposed to being exclusive to super-human maverick lovers, whilst the rest of the world persists in its sordid, self-destructive perversions. Therefore, I have focused upon Shelley’s representations of Gothic-influenced sexuality, drawing out their thematic significance (socio-political, philosophical, and religious) and developing a spectrum of sources and related materials (especially of medieval authors) which encouraged and directed the persistence of the Gothic in his mature works.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*, p. 63.

**‘Trammelled in the chains of mortality’:<sup>43</sup>**

**Shelley’s reworking of *The Monk* and *Zofloya***

The case for serious consideration of Shelley’s early prose romances has been outlined by David Seed in his essay ‘Shelley’s “Gothick” in *St. Irvyne* and after’, which asserts that Shelley’s interest in the Gothic genre was not a mere dalliance on the way to more serious modes of literature. Shelley himself had made such a claim to William Godwin<sup>44</sup> in 1812, but his initial enthusiasm for the objective prose of *Political Justice* must be balanced against the styles of his subsequent major works. In particular, Seed notes the imagery in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ as an inheritance from the derided Gothic literature of his youth:

The comparison of autumnal leaves to ‘ghosts from an enchanter fleeing’ in the ‘Ode to the West Wind’ is only the most famous example of a kind of imagery which spreads throughout Shelley’s mature poetry.<sup>45</sup>

Seed’s claim applies equally well to the imagery that closes ‘Ode to the West Wind’, where the poet portrays himself as the ‘enchanter’ and his ‘dead thoughts’ as the ‘ghosts’, driven ‘among mankind’ ‘by the incantation of this verse’ (ll. 63-7). A similar development is notable in stanzas 5 and 6 of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, where the poet depicts himself as a morbid, ghoulish being in his youth.

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<sup>43</sup> *ZSI*, p. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to Godwin of Jan. 10, 1812, in *Letters I*, pp. 227-9.

<sup>45</sup> David Seed, ‘Shelley’s “Gothick” in *St. Irvyne* and after’, in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982), pp. 39-70 (p. 68).

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
 Hopes of High talk with the departed dead. (ll. 49-52)

Perhaps he attempts thus to repudiate his early literary endeavours, although he continues to reinstate their sepulchral registers in describing his subsequent conversion from superstition to spirituality.

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers  
 To thee and thine – have I not kept the vow?  
 With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
 I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
 Each from his voiceless grave: [...] (ll.61-5)

It would appear that the Gothic was not a mode to be shaken off lightly. Seed's statement could well apply to works ranging from *Laon and Cythna*, 'Rosalind and Helen', *Julian and Maddalo* and, most particularly of all, *The Cenci*, which is virtually a whole-hearted return to the Gothic mode, albeit in a more accomplished form than Shelley's early ventures. The likelihood therefore is that Shelley, far from having dismissed the Gothic in his major works, assimilated it into most and greatly developed it in some, with a degree of artistic control that the contemporary commentators of authors in this genre persistently refused to recognise.

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Charlotte ('Rosa Matilda') Dacre's *Zofloya*, the influences of which are betrayed (if not flaunted) throughout *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, were both the target of vitriolic reviews. In the case of the former author, whilst he was acknowledged to be of 'no

common genius' by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he was then lambasted on account of his perceived immorality and frivolous choice of genre:

the most painful impression which the work left on our minds was that of great acquirements and splendid genius employed to finish a *mormo* for children, a poison for youth, and a provocative for the debauchee. Tales of enchantments and witchcraft can never be *useful*: our author has contrived to make them *pernicious*, by blending, with an irreverent negligence, all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition.<sup>46</sup>

Strange comments, on the face of it, from the author of *Christabel* and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but predictable enough within a literary marketplace where the Gothic novel was seen as a trivial and generic commodity, best fitted to stirring indolent imaginations and with dubious enough effects in that role.<sup>47</sup>

Jane Austen's critical assessment in *Northanger Abbey* is a case in point, which significantly assigns *The Monk* as reading matter for the vicious and vulgar John Thorpe.<sup>48</sup> The qualified approval her satirical plot reveals for Ann Radcliffe's genre of 'explained supernatural', if anything, strengthens this condemnation of the Gothic sub-genre represented by Lewis: a fantasy of pure transgression in which evil and anarchy emerge as uncontrollable forces. Good tends to be represented by weakness and vacillation and evil characters must practically self-destruct before the fragile social order descends into complete anarchy. Austen's novel reflects the established critical

<sup>46</sup> From *Critical Review*, vol. 19 (February 1797), pp. 194-200.

<sup>47</sup> See Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 62-9. This section of Gamer's study ('Economies: the circulating library and the periodicals') analyses the contemporary association between the 1790's proliferation of Gothic novels and the development of a literary mass market. 'Consequently, we see gothic writing in both periodical review and literary essay blamed for various changes in literary production and consumption: perceived shifts from quality to quantity; originality to mass-production; and the text-as-work to the text-as-commodity.'

<sup>48</sup> See *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, ed. John Davie (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 42-3.

opinion:<sup>49</sup> her sympathetic protagonists are, or become, intelligent readers of the safe, establishment Gothic authored by Radcliffe, whilst a boorish antagonist is allotted 'Monk' Lewis. Surely this is a clear comment that Austen saw nothing more in the mode of unrestrained supernatural fantasy and transgression than the contagious, sensational if expertly depicted immorality which earned the ire of Coleridge. In the words of Lisa M. Wilson:

As Lewis was aware, writing in the debased genre of the Gothic novel was an unlikely route to literary laurels, since the genre was commonly constructed as the province of hack writers, especially women. As a man who rose to fame as a Gothic novelist, a form conventionally thought of as "light," and therefore "well adapted to female ingenuity," Lewis's masculinity as well as his literary authority would already have been called into question by his choice of genre.<sup>50</sup>

The question of masculinity is particularly pertinent as regards Shelley's responses to his Gothic sources and, indeed, the matter of sexuality throughout his works: not only the conception of the genre as the domain of women writers, but also the conception of the marketplace for novels as containing a high proportion of young women influenced critical reactions. By the standards of the time, this was an uninformed and impressionable audience, as Jane Austen was at pains to assert.

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<sup>49</sup> See. E J Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 106-7.

By the second edition of *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) [Radcliffe's] work is in every sense 'authorised'. 'Ann Radcliffe' appeared on the title page and the author was mentioned by name in the reviews which lavished praise on the *dénouement* by which 'every extraordinary appearance seems naturally to arise from causes, not very uncommon'. This was a variety of imaginative fiction which the guardians of enlightenment felt they could wholly approve [...] Progress and the taste for primitive superstition were reconciled. The eagerness of the critics' welcome gives the impression almost of relief, as if Radcliffe's innovation gave an opportunity to come to terms with the barbarians at the gates without surrendering the fort.

Clery's metaphor has considerable resonance within the spectrum of Shelley's Gothic inheritances. Defining post-Enlightenment society as an orderly, predatory pattern of individualism and injustice, by the time of *The Cenci* Shelley has horrified the establishment critics with the revelation that the barbarians were the ones holding the fort in the first place.

<sup>50</sup> Lisa M Wilson, 'Monk' Lewis as Literary Lion.' *Romanticism On the Net* 8 (November 1997) <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/literary.html> [accessed 20 October 2001].



Mary Wollstonecraft also famously lamented ‘the reveries of the stupid novelists’.<sup>51</sup>

The profusion of hack novelists and imitators, and the perception of a mass uneducated readership, accounts for the reservations of reviewers: it would be a safe assumption that the majority of Gothic novels would not presume to have any moral or social function, and, in any case, such purposes would be lost upon most consumers. In such a system, the extreme sensationalism of *The Monk* was therefore unforgivable, and it is apparent that the stereotype was still in force in 1810 when *Zastrozzi* was reviewed:

Does the author, whoever he may be, think his gross and wanton pages fit to meet the eye of a modest young woman? Is this the instruction to be instilled under the title of a romance? Such trash, indeed, as this work contains, is fit only for the inmates of a brothel. It is by such means of corruption as this that the tastes of our youth of both sexes become vitiated, their imaginations heated, and a foundation laid for their future misery and dishonour.<sup>52</sup>

When this review is taken as a whole, the reviewer seems intent upon overlooking any possible moral or social function to dwell entirely upon the ‘gross and wanton’ incidents as if Shelley was offering them up for examples, as opposed to warnings. That the reviewer also elects to read the text in the wrong order, beginning with the critical *dénouement*, seems either a concerted effort at misreading or an insult to the intelligence of the readers, as we shall see.

David Seed writes of *Zastrozzi* (considering it to be of less interest than *St. Irvyne*): ‘Throughout the work sexuality is constantly associated with evil and wickedness,’<sup>53</sup> which I will only qualify by suggesting that Shelley does at least, in the characters of Verezzi and Julia, posit

<sup>51</sup> *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 5, eds. Janet Todd & Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), pp. 255-8.

<sup>52</sup> From *Critical Review*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, XXI (Nov 1810), pp.329-331, in *The Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. 1, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1972), pp. 297-8.

<sup>53</sup> *Essays on Shelley*, p.41.

(albeit vaguely) an ideal, consummated union that is drawn upon in greater length in *St. Irvyne* (between Fitzeustace and Eloise). Admittedly, the continual frustration and eventual bloody termination of this possibility is the driving force of *Zastrozzi*, but even this grim little work paints a less sexually cynical picture than its most direct influence, Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*. One need only compare the original 'love-triangle' from which Shelley draws his characters. Somewhat appropriately, considering how little her actual character is realised, Julia of *Zastrozzi* is described in the terms of an 'ethereal', 'angelic' and ideal being.<sup>54</sup> Even at this very early stage of Shelley's career, there is the suggestion of a Platonic dichotomy in the love-triangle: Verezzi's sudden awakening to the reality of his situation upon discovering Julia alive in Venice (having been falsely informed of her death) depicts his purely sensual relations with the practically vampiric Matilda in the terms of a 'Lethan torpor', and its sexual pleasures as 'air-built visions' (p. 84). By contrast, Julia is 'the index of that soul to which he had sworn everlasting fidelity' – an ideal and eternal form of beauty, inviting comparisons to the *Republic* and the *Symposium*.

Then what about the man who recognizes the existence of beautiful things, but does not believe in beauty itself, and is incapable of following anyone who wants to lead him to a knowledge of it? Is he awake, or merely dreaming? Look; isn't dreaming simply the confusion between a resemblance, and the reality which it resembles, whether the dreamer be asleep or awake?<sup>55</sup>

What may we suppose to be the felicity of the man who sees absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed, who, instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and colour and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone? Do you think that it will be a poor life that a man leads who has

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<sup>54</sup> *ZSI*, pp. 83, 89.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.270.

his gaze fixed in that direction, who contemplates absolute beauty with the appropriate faculty and is in constant union with it? Do you not see that in that region alone where he sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, will he be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved of God, and becoming, if ever a man can, immortal himself.<sup>56</sup>

These passages may well relate to many of Shelley's later works, but allegorical and philosophical depth is not often acknowledged this early in his career. Such unexpected idealism merits further examination: for it becomes conspicuous by its absence from either *The Monk* or *Zofloya*.

The love that is depicted between Henriquez and his juvenile fiancé Lilla proves as dubious as any other of the relationships in Dacre's novel: all distinguished by adultery, sensuality and treachery. This incipient union is mainly distinguished by the intense lust that the youthful, but mature Henriquez entertains for a girl who is not yet of age, and provides a clear example of disingenuous narrative:

[...] that the narrator fails to remark on the singularity of this instance of paedophiliac object-choice marks again her resignation in the face of masculine desire. The perverse exaggeration of Henriquez's drive for an innocent object would, however, have been obvious to contemporary readers.<sup>57</sup>

All three of these novels owe much of their dramatic force to 'masculine desire', as shall be

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<sup>56</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by W. Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> *Zofloya or The Moor*, edited with an introduction and notes by Kim Ian Michasiw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.276.

seen. That of Henriquez is certainly ill-calculated to the peace of either party. He begins by attempting to persuade Lilla to disregard the death-bed wishes of her ‘tyrannical’ father (*Zofloya* p.131) not to marry until a year from his death. His complete disregard of law and religion hardly seems to support Victoria’s vision of his salvation (p.144), further undermined by his later suicide in intense disgust at his inadvertently misdirected lust (pp. 221-2). His final night of drunken, frenzied revelling with Victoria (whom he imagines, in a drug-induced hallucination, to be Lilla) – whilst this may be to the taste of Victoria – makes somewhat of a mockery of his protestations of loving Lilla for her purity (pp.168, 196). Evidently, a purity he would take the pleasure of marrying at the first available opportunity.

‘Purity’ is one of most significant registers adopted in the description of Lilla. In early appearances she is depicted in similar terms to Julia, but the spiritual similes are portentously mixed with references to her juvenile innocence, her virginity and her extreme vulnerability.

[...] her person so small, yet of so just proportion; sweet, expressing a seraphic serenity of soul, seemed her angelic countenance, slightly suffused with the palest hue of the virgin rose. [...] she might have personified (were the idea allowable) innocence in the days of her childhood.<sup>58</sup>

The idea may not be allowable for the narrator, but in this Gothic context where transgression is the rule, the defenceless Lilla is a prime target for both sex and death. This depiction is reinforced at her death scene, where she is discovered in the posture of an innocent faced with impending rape (p. 223) as opposed to murder. The two crimes, however, are frequently compounded in these novels, where phallic power is embodied in the ubiquitous stiletto.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Zofloya*, p.133.

<sup>59</sup> Including *St. Irvyne or The Rosicrucian*. I am indebted to Peter Finch’s article for highlighting the significance of this motif, and how it demonstrates the sexual, destructive and transferable nature of power within the Gothic genre (Peter Finch, ‘Monstrous Inheritance: The Sexual Politics of Genre in Shelley’s *St. Irvyne*’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 48 (1999), pp. 35-68 (pp. 42-3).):

*The Monk* is replete with this compound image of sex, death and power, inherited from Pyramus and Thisbe and (more obviously, judging from Lewis' sepulchral settings) *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet's suicidal self-penetration – doubtless a predecessor of the Olympia episode in *St. Irvyne*,<sup>60</sup> where it is cynically and significantly presented without pretensions as an illustration of self-destructive lust – is reflected in an aborted act in *The Monk*: Matilda threatens to stab herself if deprived of Ambrosio's 'friendship'.<sup>61</sup> Though it is only later that she reveals the lustful nature of her feelings (*The Monk* p.80), through this initial act she establishes her continued dominance in her relationship with Ambrosio. In the second reflection of this scene, when Ambrosio wields the stiletto to murder the victim of his lust (p.334-5), his sexual assertion of power is belied by the directing authority ('with an air of passion and majesty') of Matilda. The weakness of the male characters is even more pronounced in both *Zofloya* and *Zastrozzi*. Whereas the sensual slavery of Henriquez, Leonardo and Verezzi ultimately results in such acts of self-penetration, the phallic dagger is wielded by the female protagonists with lethal efficiency. Victoria's murder of Lilla goes considerably beyond Ambrosio's act, which consists of a mere two stabs in the bosom in comparison to Victoria's 'innumerable wounds' in 'the bosom, in the shoulder and other parts' (*Zofloya* p.226). Victoria has already appropriated a masculine role, in her own terms: '[...] would that this unwieldy form could compressed into the fairy delicacy of [Lilla's], these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face!' This construction of the feminine, in contrast to Victoria's sensual and destructive masculinity, appears very much in accord with Mary

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[...] the Olympia episode betrays with unusual clarity an anxiety about the possession of phallic power itself. The dagger has been lent by Megalena, and Wolfstein has to prove himself as a lover by wielding her gift to suitably violent effect. [...] he finds himself in fact powerless and dependent for his phallic status upon the very woman over whom he is supposedly dominant. The sexually assertive woman, Megalena, owns this phallus and the beautifully 'innocent' woman, Olympia, wields it on his behalf, inflicting it upon herself. [...] Behind the Olympia episode then lurks the possibility that the phallus is neither possessed nor controlled by the masculinity that it privileges [...] What the episode further implies is that the very idea of the Phallus may be a myth, the empty and fractured center of a network of power and desire which enfolds all its subjects in its constructions of masculine and feminine yet which actually fulfils neither male nor female subjectivities. What it engenders here is only cruelty, guilt and death.

<sup>60</sup> *ZSI*, pp. 143-54.

<sup>61</sup> *The Monk*, edited with an introduction and notes by Christopher Maclachlan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp.59-60.

Wollstonecraft's opinion of contemporary 'ideal' womanhood:

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists. I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.<sup>62</sup>

This construction, however, which serves to establish the masculine monopoly of power, is depicted as being doubly corrupting: for it leads women into vicious and secret methods in order to reclaim the balance of power (*Rights of Woman* p. 77), thus exposing the artificial nature of the construction.<sup>63</sup> Charlotte Dacre takes this to an extreme in the character of Victoria. The woman

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<sup>62</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 75.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud's treatment of such distinctions: *On Sexuality*, edited and translated by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

So far as the auto-erotic and masturbatory manifestations of sexuality are concerned, we might lay it down that the sexuality of little girls is of a wholly masculine character. Indeed, if we were able to give a more definite connotation to the concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine', it would even be possible to maintain that libido is invariably and necessarily of a masculine nature, whether it occurs in men or in women and irrespective of whether its object is a man or a woman. (p. 141)

It is essential to understand clearly that the concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine' whose meaning seems so unambiguous to ordinary people, are among the most confused that occur in science. [...] 'Masculine' and 'feminine' are used sometimes in the sense of *activity* and *passivity*, sometime is a *biological*, and sometimes, again, in a *sociological* sense. [...] Activity and its concomitant phenomena (more powerful muscular development, aggressiveness, greater intensity of libido) are as a rule linked with biological masculinity; but they are not necessarily so [...] in human beings pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character-traits belonging to his own and to the opposite sex; and he shows a combination of activity and passivity whether or not these character-traits tally with his biological ones.  
(pp. 141-142 n. 1)

who passively submits to these constructions (in this case, Lilla) may expect no reward for it, but to be treated in the role she has accepted: that of victim.

Shelley would be considering this corrupt masculine-feminine divide as late as *The Cenci*. The actual domain of Wollstonecraft's negative feminine attributes is not straightforward in *Zastrozzi*, but it is certainly not in Julia, who remains an undeveloped ideal figure. The destructive and highly sexual masculine role is unmistakably appropriated by Matilda, in terms even more explicit than Dacre's. Her murder of Julia – another example of multiple stab wounds – is committed 'with exulting pleasure' (*Zastrozzi* p.89). Even more determinedly than Dacre's Victoria, Matilda rejects the conventional weak feminine virtues outlined by Wollstonecraft. "[...] is it for this that I have despised the delicacy of my sex?" (p.27) she asks of herself, and Verezzi later confirms that opinion (p.28). Verezzi, it is worth noting, is far from being the ideal lover of *The Symposium*, and bases his love for Julia precisely on this socially-constructed masculine-feminine contrast which Matilda, as far as he is concerned, grotesquely transgresses with her "scintillating eye", "commanding countenance" and "bold expressive gaze" (p.29). Matilda's fault might in fact be that she has no interest in dispelling this illusion of phallic power, but has quite consciously chosen to join the empowered side. Her appropriation does attain grotesque heights: her thought processes are distressingly described in terms of male auto-erotism: ' "He shall love me – he shall be mine – mine for ever," mentally ejaculated Matilda.' (p.26) In a scene repeated from *Zofloya* – the frenzied banquet in which the drugged Henriquez seizes Victoria for an impassioned dance (*Zofloya* p.220) – we note that Matilda takes the part of Henriquez:

Animated with excessive delight, she started from the table, and seizing Verezzi's hand, in a transport of inconceivable bliss, dragged him in wild sport and varied movements to the sound of swelling and soul touching melody.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Zastrozzi*, p.76.

The word ‘excessive’ forms an apt summary of lovers’ pleasures in the world of *Zastrozzi*. Matilda lives purely for sexual desire, to the point that although she has not entirely dismissed the concept of a higher world, her image of it is a distinct picture of eternally requited lust (pp .48-9). ‘[...] “will the passion which now consumes me possess my soul to all eternity?”’ she asks, expressing her hopes of joint salvation with Verezzi, but apparently failing to notice that she has just described a perfect means of avoiding heaven.<sup>65</sup> Effectively enslaved to her emotions, she has lost the use of ‘reflection’ (p. 76) and has fallen into the Platonic trap of confounding the body and the spirit.<sup>66</sup> This is a common enough malaise of Gothic lovers, and is frequently expressed in the terms of a physical union between corpses, or a necrophiliac union between a live lover and a dead beloved. In various works Shelley makes use of both unions, and as will be seen, the consequences are uniformly disastrous for the lovers involved. I do not propose to dwell on *St. Irvyne* (which, whilst showing a greater development of style than *Zastrozzi*’s undisguised pastiche, I consider to have far less consistency of purpose), but it would be worthwhile to refer to the poem of the necrophiliac monk.<sup>67</sup> His fate, having breached the coffin of his dead lover to encounter her reanimated cadaver, is not entirely clear, but does not seem hopeful, heralded as it is by the triumph of fiends and damned spirits:

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Plato’s view of incarnation in the *Phaedo*. See *The Last Days of Socrates*, translated with an introduction by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), pp. 97-183:

And we must suppose, my dear fellow, that the corporeal is heavy, oppressive, earthly and visible. So the soul which is tainted by its presence is weighed down and dragged back into the visible world, through fear (as they say) of Hades or the invisible, and hovers about tombs and graveyards. The shadowy apparitions which have actually been seen there are the ghosts of those souls which have not got clear away, but still retain some portion of the visible; which is why they can be seen. (pp.133-4)

This passage applies to works of Shelley of much better note than *Zastrozzi*, but is worth noting at this point specifically to demonstrate the presence of distinctly Gothic imagery in Plato’s works. Shelley’s evident continued interest in the Gothic genre after 1812, his own protests aside (cf. Seed, pp. 67-8) may thus be considered alongside his increasing interest in Plato, as will be seen.

<sup>66</sup> See passage in *Phaedo* as above, and also pp. 179-80:

I can’t persuade Crito that I am this Socrates here who is talking to you now and marshalling all the arguments; he thinks that I am the one whom he will see presently lying dead; and he asks how to bury me! [...] mis-statements are not merely jarring in their immediate context; they also have a bad effect upon the soul. No, you must keep up your spirits and say that it is only my body that you are burying [...]

<sup>67</sup> *ZSI*, p. 128.



And her skeleton form the dead Nun rear'd,  
     Which dripp'd with the chill dew of hell.  
 In her half-eaten eyeballs two pale flames appear'd,  
 And triumphant their gleam on the dark Monk glared,  
     As he stood within the cell.

The association of the monk's overwrought sexuality with death, decay and damnation is at all events unmistakable. The paradoxical physicality of ghosts, as described by Plato, is a cornerstone of the Gothic. Apparitions such as Shelley's 'skeleton' nun and her predecessor – Lewis's 'bleeding nun' (*The Monk*, pp.139-53) – are tied to the appearance of the body in decay. This in itself serves as a gruesome illustration of Platonic and Christian ideals: those who are enslaved to the desires of the body base their future hopes upon an object that is certain to come to putrefaction and eventual dissolution, and the Gothic genre forces them into absolute identification with it.

Thus, wherever the Gothic is concerned with sexuality, there is very little room for a positive treatment of love. Lewis defers happy marriages until the conclusion, thus saving the difficulty of stating how sexual desire can be divorced from the anti-social, egocentric chaos established by Ambrosio. Dacre only supposes the happy union of Henriquez and Lilla in the dreams of Victoria (*Zofloya* p.144), but it is hard to believe that Henriquez's love has transcended sexual attraction. Aside from the dubious merit in preferring a lover on account of her over-stressed innocence (which is possibly the most transient quality he could have fixed upon), he clearly confuses body and spirit in the classic image:

“[...] Without her, life to me would be a dreary blank; and, if fate snatched her from

me in *this* world, I would die, yes, hasten to die, that my soul might rejoin her in the next, and my body repose by her pure form in the grave.”<sup>68</sup>

His suicidal devotion is a tragic sentiment of doubtful merit, recalling such ill-starred lovers as Romeo and Juliet and Boccaccio’s Troiolo of *Il Filostrato*, who – upon mistaking his lover for dead – decides to join her soul in hell.<sup>69</sup> One must certainly wonder how Henriquez can reconcile this statement with his presumed Catholicism, but his concept of an eternal existence is contaminated by the condition he sets: the continued presence of the earthly and physical, notwithstanding that his lover’s ‘pure form’ is destined for swift putrefaction. His ‘ideal’ afterlife thus proves no better than Matilda’s: an eternal continuation of sexual pleasure, and this sentiment is echoed by Verezzi: ““Julia! Julia [...] thy fair form now moulders in the dark sepulchre! Would I were laid beside thee!”” (p. 38) Such a fixation on the companionship of corpses is a morbid enough hint of the latent tendencies to sensuality and apathy that accelerate, or possibly cause, Verezzi’s fall. Matilda may seem to be the active agent – certainly, Verezzi seems almost masochistically passive – but at the same time, for all that she dominates much of the story, she is a character immune to development.<sup>70</sup> Verezzi is the true protagonist, and as far as he is concerned, Julia is the Uranian Aphrodite and Matilda is most emphatically the Pandemian Aphrodite<sup>71</sup> – a somewhat ironic figure,

<sup>68</sup> Zofloya, p. 168.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Il Filostrato*, part IV, 120-4 in *Chaucer’s Boccaccio*, edited and translated by N.R. Haveley (Cambridge, Suffolk, Totowa NJ: D.S. Brewer; Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), p.69.

Whilst hell in a pre-Christian setting might be taken to refer to classical Hades (which Chaucer specifically refers to in his version of this scene in *Troilus and Criseyde*), Boccaccio earlier suggests otherwise in Criseida’s impious prayer concerning her father Calchas, “God grant you may go down to the pit of Hell when you die,” (p. 66) which is notably inspired by her aborted love-lust affair with Troiolo. Whilst Boccaccio’s narrator often indulges in apparent celebrations of sensuality, in this work and *Teseida* (p. 49-50, 130, 150-1), scepticism surfaces on more than one occasion. Most notably, book XI of *Teseida*, in which the spirit of Arcita ascends to the eighth sphere and looking down, ‘deplored the futile behaviour of earthly men whose minds are so darkened and befogged as to make them frenziedly pursue the false attractions of the world and turn away from Heaven.’ (p. 144) Nevertheless, the very fact of his ascent suggests that Boccaccio did not wish to damn lustful lovers as surely as Dante, Plato and Shelley did (which is hardly surprising, if the lover’s pleas in Boccaccio’s prologues contain a grain of truth).

<sup>70</sup> I discount her sudden, self-interested and singularly unconvincing Christian conversion in prison (pp. 96-7). In spite of the apparent approval of the narrator on conventional religious grounds, which are most probably ironic as far as Shelley himself is concerned, I am inclined to sympathise with the opinions of Zastrozzi (pp. 100-2) that Matilda’s new guiding principle is belated, selfish and slavish.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. The speech of Pausanias in *The Symposium*, (pp. 45-53) describing both purely sensual (‘Pandemian’) and spiritual (‘Uranian’) types of love.

considering that lust is here defined as explicitly masculine.

Verezzi, at all events, is a tragic figure. In spite of his ‘sepulchre’ slip, he is initially capable of aspiring to a lovers’ relationship that is based upon ‘congeniality of sentiment’ (p. 52) as opposed to physical intercourse. His genuine sensibility – not to be mistaken for the affected virtue/ vice outlined by Wollstonecraft<sup>72</sup> – indicates that his sympathies extend further than the completely ego-centric boundaries of Matilda and Zastrozzi. The nature of lust in *Zastrozzi*, unfortunately for him, is practically soul-destroying: ‘The fire of voluptuous, of maddening love scorched his veins’, and true to the metaphor, it spreads like wildfire. ‘[...] a total forgetfulness of every former event of his life swam in his dizzy brain. [...] Verezzi’s whole frame was agitated by unwonted and ardent emotions.’ (p. 79)

The terms ‘emotion’ and ‘passion’ are always subject to negative definitions in *Zastrozzi*. Zastrozzi, ‘alive to nothing but revenge’, depicts himself as driven by ‘emotions which agitate my breast and madden my brain [...]’ (p. 47). This description of his soul-deadening impulse to destruction is closely reflected in subsequent descriptions of Verezzi’s and Matilda’s lust. Even this slightest of mortal sins<sup>73</sup> is thus shown in the same essential character as the greater. Passions are similarly grouped in the *Phaedo*:

When anyone’s soul feels a keen pleasure or pain it cannot help supposing that whatever causes the most violent emotion is the plainest and truest reality; which it is not. [...] every pleasure or pain has a sort of rivet with which it fastens the soul to the body and pins it down and makes it corporeal, accepting as true whatever the body certifies. [...] Consequently it is excluded from all fellowship with the pure and uniform and divine.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Which Matilda, true to her form as a woman working for power within the system, affects (pp. 63-3).

<sup>73</sup> To borrow Dante’s hierarchy from *Hell*.

<sup>74</sup> *Phaedo*, p. 136.

While it could scarcely be said that *Zastrozzi* was written at the height of Shelley's Platonic leanings, and contains little enough of the idealism that later works would emphasise, the negative echoes of Plato are significant.<sup>75</sup> *Zastrozzi* and Matilda are 'alive to nothing' save their dominating passions: respectively, revenge and 'Verezzi' (p. 52). Half-dead themselves, and having sacrificed hopes of immortality in the exercise of power and pleasure, they are also carriers of 'infection' (p. 86) to those who might otherwise be preserved. No exemplar of Platonic love to begin with, Verezzi<sup>76</sup> proves all too susceptible to this cynical influence. The extremity of his negative passions concerning Matilda, which cause him to avoid her embraces 'with irresistible disgust' (p. 45), are turned to the opposite extreme, thus signalling again that unhealthy link between pain and sensuality which Shelley emphasises in describing lust in terms of fire and fever. The violent, physical nature of his revulsion indicates the failure of Verezzi's ideals concerning body and soul. 'His head reposed upon Matilda's bosom; he started from it violently, as if stung by a scorpion, and fell upon the floor,' (p. 37) as if in fear of poisoning or contamination.<sup>77</sup> Throughout his works Shelley holds to the conviction that 'no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another',<sup>78</sup> so Verezzi's fear is

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<sup>75</sup> Shelley's early interest in the necrotic aspect of the *Phaedo* is also illustrated in his letter to Hogg of June 2 1811:

What is *Passion*? The very word implies an incapacity for action, otherwise than in unison with its dictates. What is reason? It is a thing independent and inflexible; it adapts thoughts and actions to the varying circumstances, which for ever change - adapts them so as to produce the greatest overbalance of happiness. [...] You loved a being; the being, whom you loved, is not what she was; consequently, as love appertains to mind, and not body, she exists no longer. [...] does it not border on wilful deception, deliberate, intentional self-deceit, to continue to love the body when the soul is no more? As well might you court the worms which the soulless body of a beloved being generates - be lost to yourself, and to those who admire you for what is really amiable in you; in the damp, unintelligent vaults of a charnel-house. Surely, when it is carried to the dung-heap as a mass of putrefaction, the loveliness of the flower ceases to charm. Surely it would be irrational to annex to this inert mass the properties which the flower in its state of beauty possesses, which now cease to exist, and then did *merely* exist, because adjoined to it. (*Letters I*, p. 95)

Themes and images in this letter resound throughout Shelley's works - notably *Queen Mab*, 'Invocation to Misery', 'On Love', 'The Sensitive Plant' and others (which might, on a related note, also include *Frankenstein*).

<sup>76</sup> See *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, pp. 23-9, 57-62, 142-52 for in-depth analyses of *Zastrozzi*:

To call *Zastrozzi* Verezzi's "dark" *Doppelgänger* may suggest that Verezzi himself is the virtuous half of the pair. But although this early work does anticipate the diametrically opposed doubles that clash within the poems of Shelley's maturity, the young author is not yet able (or willing?) to create a character who embodies the highest of Shelleyan virtues, disinterested love. (p. 57)

<sup>77</sup> *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, pp.126-7. Crook and Guiton's study of venereal imagery in Shelley's works draws important links between the image of the scorpion, lust and syphilis.

<sup>78</sup> From the preface to *The Cenci* in *PP*, p. 240.

another example of passionate excess.<sup>79</sup> When Matilda and Zastrozzi discover the appropriate stimulus – an appeal to Verezzi’s generosity (pp. 73-5) – this ‘irresistible’ energy is almost instantly diverted to the self-destructive passion that completely erodes his latent idealism and hastens on his suicidal downfall: another symbolic self-penetration with his own ‘poniard’ (p. 88). His ‘bitter smile of exultation’ reflects the ‘exulting pleasure’ Matilda gains in despatching Julia and thus stresses the intensely sadomasochistic nature of passion that pervades the Gothic genre and continues into Shelley’s major works.<sup>80</sup>

Zastrozzi’s biography provides further evidence that passion – far from having positive and negative aspects – is simply a double-edged sword:

I have a spirit, ardent, impetuous as thine; but acquaintance with the world has induced me to veil it, though it still continues to burn within my bosom. [...] Love is worthy of any risque – I felt it once, but revenge has now swallowed up every other feeling of my soul – I am alive to nothing but revenge. (p. 47)

Zastrozzi, arguing that passions only exist to be yielded to, has redirected the current of his from ‘love’ to ‘revenge’, but to his credit, this must contain a certain amount of negative self-awareness. By ‘love’ it is hard to suppose that the resolutely cynical anti-hero could mean anything other than the destructive lustful passions and will to sexual power that parasitically cling to the name of ‘love’ in *Zastrozzi*, as the commentator of the *Critical Review* points out:

Verezzi, who is a poor fool, and any thing but a man, falls into the snare, forgets his

Julia, indulges a vicious passion for Matilda, which the author denominates love, but

<sup>79</sup> One might contrast the lofty indifference with which Socrates rejects the libidinous Alcibiades in *Symposium*, pp. 104-7: ‘What do you suppose to have been my state of mind after that? On the one hand I realised that I had been slighted, but on the other I felt a reverence for Socrates’ character, his self-control and courage; I had met a man whose like for wisdom and fortitude I could never have expected to encounter.’ We note that Verezzi’s undisguised detestation of Matilda inflames her lust and her anger to greater excesses (*Zastrozzi*, p. 48).

<sup>80</sup> The sadistic element, however, was to be foregrounded.

which is as far removed from that exalted passion as modesty is from indecency, and deserves a name which we shall not offend our readers by repeating. [...] Matilda's character is that of a lascivious fiend, who dignifies a vicious, unrestrained passion by the appellation of love.<sup>81</sup>

In some respects, this review is penetrating. It establishes – albeit in a very disapproving fashion – Verezzi's status as an 'unmanly', sentimental hero. It does not appear, however, to recognise Matilda as the source of masculine energies, and instead places her in the realm of inhumanity.<sup>82</sup> In the scheme of *Zastrozzi*, Verezzi's lack of conventional masculinity can only be to his credit.<sup>83</sup> Whilst the reviewer identifies 'love' in *Zastrozzi* as a misnomer for lust, it is doubtful that the author, in light of the 'chapel-house' letter to Hogg and the novel itself, would have agreed that there was even such a thing as an 'exalted passion' or that this was an appropriate description of 'true' love.<sup>84</sup>

The review errs most conspicuously, however, in choosing to summarise *Zastrozzi* backwards and judging it in the reversed form:

His mother, who had been seduced by an Italian nobleman by the name of Verezzi, and left by him in wretchedness and want, conjures her son, on her death bed, to revenge

<sup>81</sup> *The Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol 1, p. 298

<sup>82</sup> To help account for the pseudo-Christian/ Gothic extremity of this reviewer's reaction, see Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 152 (concerning *The Monk*): 'The distinction between the sexes disturbed by the discovery that Rosario is a woman is reaffirmed by the discovery that the woman who has autonomy, reason, and authority is in reality a demon.' The application to *Zastrozzi*, however, is far from absolute, since Shelley's strongly 'masculine' characters - Zastrozzi and Matilda - are possessed of only superficial 'reason' and 'autonomy': enough to act as effective slaves to their own passions. It is notable, on the other hand, that the 'ideal' woman - Julia - is not devoid of these unfeminine traits, albeit in a strictly passive sense, and excepting her final ill-advised journey by no means displays the childlike vulnerability of a Lilla: "[...] Julia yet lives, and, surrounded by wealth and power, yet defies our vengeance. [...] No bravo in Naples dare attempt her life: [...]" (p. 61)

<sup>83</sup> *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 61: '[Matilda's] overpoweringly masculine (and libidinous) character makes her, rather than the effeminate Verezzi or her own spiritual mate, the revenge-obsessed Zastrozzi, the true heir of Verezzi Sr.'s cruel libertinism.'

<sup>84</sup> Unless we accept the paradoxical attribution of the term 'passion' to the 'chaste and mild emotion which had characterised [Verezzi's] love for Julia' (p. 75), in which case an 'exalted passion' is marked by the absence of passion in any normally accepted sense. As Bonca states, however, Verezzi is a far cry from the ideal figure of the disinterested lover, and thus any 'emotion' attributed to him is suspect to some degree.

her wrongs on Verezzi and his progeny for ever! Zastrozzi fulfils her diabolical injunctions, by assassinating her seducer, and pursues the young Verezzi, his son, with unrelentless and savage cruelty. (p. 297)

Beginning the novel *ab ovo*, tracing the sadistic plot and then concluding the summary with Zastrozzi's confession has the result of casting the novel's *dénouement* in a completely superfluous light. One can hardly approve of such a tactic when considering what a similar effect such treatment would have on the plot of *Zofloya* or *The Monk*. Having begun such a hypothetical synopsis with 'Satan had formed a resolution to corrupt Victoria/ Ambrosio', a significant source of drama is thus instantly removed (the mysterious nature of the tempter) and the wrong character is placed in the foreground. Zastrozzi is not the protagonist of the work that bears his name any more than Francesco Cenci or, indeed, Zofloya the Moor/ Satan, and as with the latter, the revelation of his nature and motives is a climactic event. But unlike the standard *diabolus ex machina* of the Gothic novel (twice deployed by Shelley himself in *St. Irvyne*), which neatly ties up all the chaotic ends of lust, madness and murder into a conventional dualistic system, Zastrozzi's status as a 'diabolic' human is extremely and openly problematic. By no means can he be considered as the source of evil within the novel, and whilst he may have the looks of a 'demi-god' (p. 101), he is by no means even the master of his own psyche. Enslaved to his dominating passion and the dying command of his mother (pp. 101-2) he is limited to the role of an agent or a conduit of evil.

The liquid metaphor has some significance, which is made explicit in Shelley's later works,<sup>85</sup> but the communicable nature of destructive and self-destructive drives is clear enough in *Zastrozzi*. The 'source' of this contamination, as far as the novel allows us to trace, is the elder Baron Verezzi, murdered by the offspring of his lust. But even this distant patriarch – albeit a despicable one,

<sup>85</sup> *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*. 'For the *Doppelgänger* enables Shelley to confront and investigate the dark side of his conception of a dynamically interpenetrating world, a world that may involve the subject's vulnerability to and complicity in contaminating (as opposed to salutary) influences.' (p. 54) 'Zastrozzi emerges as a direct ancestor of Jupiter and Count Cenci, Self-worshipping rapists whose poisonous semen emblemizes both Shelley's deep distrust of the male eros and his ambivalence toward the world-in-relation paradigm that even his earliest works envision – and question.' (p. 62)

judging from his reported advice to his victim: to ‘exercise her profession’ (p. 102) – is part of a greater system of institutional corruption. His advocacy of prostitution clearly aligns him with the society directly condemned in Shelley’s Note to *Queen Mab*. This is considerably informative about the confluence of sexuality and power in Shelley’s works, and upon the inevitable results of death and decay, and is worth quoting at some length:

Has a woman obeyed the impulse of unerring nature; – society declares war against her, [...] she must be the tame slave, she must make no reprisals; theirs is the right of persecution, hers the duty of endurance. She lives a life of infamy: the loud and bitter laugh of scorn scares her from all return. She dies of long and lingering disease: yet *she* is in fault, *she* is the criminal, *she* is the froward and untameable child, – and society, forsooth, the pure and virtuous matron, who casts her as an abortion from her undefiled bosom! Society avenges herself on the criminals of her own creation; she is employed in anathematizing the vice to-day, which yesterday she was the most zealous to teach.<sup>86</sup>

Shelley demonstrates his compassion with the victims of seduction, and his view of prostitution as an unnatural ‘abortion’ of patriarchy, at some length in *St. Irvyne*. The two divergent fates of Eloise de St. Irvyne<sup>87</sup> both allow her a more enviable future than might have been accorded

<sup>86</sup> Note to *Queen Mab*, V. 189. Cited from *POS*, pp. 368-73 (p. 372).

<sup>87</sup> See *ZSI*, pp. 155-6, for the more conventional of the two: the ‘poor outcast wanderer’ finds her way home across a stormy wilderness, and significantly reaches it and the society of a ‘beloved sister’. In light of Bonca’s study, the sister-sister relationship could be seen as more than adequately sustaining for the outcast and the substitution of Fitzeustace considerably more to his advantage than that of Eloise. *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, pp. 96-7:

Heterosexual desire, “however pure,” occupies a low rung on the Shelleyan ladder of love because it invariably “retains the taint of earthly grossness,” the “passion of animal love” that for Shelley remained inextricably linked with physical decay and with (masculine) aggression and “self love” [...] A mother’s love is more commendable, but because the child is an offspring of sexual passion, maternal love, according to Shelley, cannot be entirely “disinterested” and “spiritual.” It is the mutual devotion of sisters that receives Shelley’s highest praise [...]

I take more or less that same position as Bonca concerning Shelley’s ‘ladder of love’, but propose to trace the issues through Shelley’s influences rather than his biography and emphasise their methodical reinstatement and



her by Radcliffe, Dickens or Gaskell. To emphasise her blamelessness, Shelley ensures that we see the seducer himself at work, and the ‘sophistry’ of Ginotti/ Nempere (p. 178) may probably be taken as a rough guide for the self-interested persuasions of the elder Verezzi.<sup>88</sup> His taunting recommendation of prostitution assumes an even stronger form in *St. Irvyne*, where it is in no sense a choice for the seduced lady, but a destiny imposed by the will of her seducer. Ginotti/ Nempere literally sets himself up as Eloise’s pimp, without her knowledge or consent, in order to pay off his gambling debts (p. 187). Society here, as in Wollstonecraft’s depiction, is intent upon a united sexual and economic control of women, either as ornamental ‘weak beings [...] only fit for a seraglio’ or ‘those unfortunate females who are broken off from society’ (*Rights of Woman*, pp. 76, 140).<sup>89</sup>

Shelley differs on the latter point: prostitution is a part of and actively encouraged by society, and associated through the false ideal of chastity<sup>90</sup> with all forms of free love. Society thus seeks to control sexuality at every turn, specifically in the interests of male ‘tyrants and sensualists’ (*Rights of Woman*, p.93) but in the interests of ‘true’ lovers of neither gender:

Love withers under constraint: its very 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 unreserve.<sup>91</sup>

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reinterpretation within his works.

<sup>88</sup> It is, however, significant that among Ginotti/ Nempere’s sophistical arguments is an anti-religious and anti-matrimonial doctrine bearing striking similarities to Shelley’s own in the notes to *Queen Mab*: ‘[...] “are we taught to believe that the union of two who love each other is wicked, unless authorized by certain rites and ceremonials, which certainly cannot change the tenour of sentiments which it is destined that these two people should entertain of each other?”’ (*ZSI*, p. 176) ‘I conceive that from the abolition of marriage, the fit and natural arrangement of sexual connection would result. [...] the genius of human happiness must tear every leaf from the accursed book of God ere man can read the inscription on his heart.’ (Note to *Queen Mab*, V. 189, pp. 372-3) A change of opinion does not seem likely, since Fitzeustace appears to endorse anti-matrimonialism and has even converted Eloise by the end of her narrative (*ZSI*, p. 197). Early in his career, Shelley is aware that even the visions of true idealists are vulnerable to the exploitations of society’s patriarchs. The patriarchal system’s assimilation of everything into its own culture is most strongly depicted in *The Cenci*.

<sup>89</sup> It is perhaps none to Henriquez’s credit, in *Zofloya*, that his idolatrous praise of Lilla slips into the register of describing her as a valuable commodity: ‘[...] a gem too bright to shed her rays beneath this contaminated roof [...]’ (p. 196). His terminology (contamination, associated with Victoria’s outspoken sexual desire) enforces the anxiety that any fall from absolute ‘purity’ would signify a loss of ‘value’.

<sup>90</sup> ‘[...] a monkish and evangelical superstition, a greater foe to natural temperance even than unintellectual sensuality [...]’ (Note to *Queen Mab*, p. 372).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

‘Love’ in the Lewis-influenced Gothic is almost invariably a matter of domination, possession and enforcement. One might cite the relationship between Agnes and Don Raymond as a more promising partnership: at all events, in spite of her extremely negative reaction to their (presumably consensual) ‘unguarded moment’, in which she allocates him his socially-correct title of ‘infamous seducer’, he becomes abjectly apologetic (*The Monk*, p. 161). This somewhat exaggerated remorse, his continued devotion to Agnes and – perhaps most significantly of all in light of *Zastrozzi* – his complete inadequacy and victimisation in the role of ostensible hero,<sup>92</sup> point to a character who will probably not assume the male prerogative of exploitation within marriage.

But this goal is by no means blithely achieved: it transpires that if Raymond will not mete out due punishment to Agnes for her ‘offence’ against patriarchal control, a duly-appointed representative of the social order will perform the function regardless of the wishes of her ‘seducer’. The sadistic prioress is another notable dagger-wielding female appropriator of masculine prerogatives (p. 304), who reduces Agnes to the state of ‘wretchedness and want’ that society demands of the female victim of seduction.

Olivia Zastrozzi provides another tragic illustration of the insidious fluidity of phallic power. Though reduced to destitution, it is at least to her credit that she explicitly refuses a positive complicity in the corrupt nexus, declaring her determination not to follow Verezzi Sr.’s recommendation of prostitution. Having refused thus far, however, she re-enters the vicious circle with a vengeance. Specifically, with the desire for vengeance, which she proposes to enact through the vehicle of her son, thus appropriating his phallic resources to strike back at her seducer and his ‘progeny’, posthumously refuting his sexual act of domination (*Zastrozzi*, pp. 101-2). In doing so,

<sup>92</sup> In the course of his narrative, not only does Raymond fail dismally in the role of ‘protector’ to Agnes (p. 162) but stumbles into situations where he finds himself much in need of protection: that of Marguerite, in the company of bandits (pp. 95-105); that of the Wandering Jew, from the Bleeding Nun (pp. 145-54); and that of Don Gaston from Donna Rodolpha’s assassins (pp. 155-6). These fortuitous escapes hardly seem to mitigate the extreme pessimism of Lewis’ scheme, in which masculine weakness is defined by sexual passivity (Raymond being practically a rape-victim as far as the Bleeding Nun is concerned) and unwillingness to exploit or possess, masculine power proves quite the opposite, both take a blameworthy role in the tragic consequences, and alternatives are neither offered nor considered. Trapped within a similar scheme, Verezzi fails to realise that there is no escape-route within its terms.

she effectively preys off her son's identity, enslaving him to the physical expression of the power-lust Verezzi Sr. has awakened in her, that cannot be expressed by a woman within this society except through subterfuge, crime or proxy. Zastrozzi thus inherits the full dominating, destructive potential of his father, and realises it through the father's death. The groundwork for Beatrice Cenci is laid here.

Zastrozzi's soul is not only 'deadened by crime' (p. 47): his dedication to the revenge of his dead mother gives his character an extremely necrotic taint. One might almost consider him the Norman Bates of 1810, except that would imply far too much significance to his mother's identity. Olivia Zastrozzi provides the direction of this inherited power-lust, but all questions of attachment or heredity are pointedly irrelevant in light of the model of society established within Shelley's chosen genre: the malaise is omnipresent, and compromises the free will (including free love) of all characters. Nevertheless, Zastrozzi's free will has practically been overruled even before his birth. Aware of his own half-life, it is hardly surprising that Zastrozzi's fantasy of afterlife – as opposed to the sensual stasis of Matilda's imagination – is simply the condition of freedom from earthly or divine authority, even if this should entail oblivion ('annihilation').

[...] I intend to meet death, to encounter annihilation with tranquillity. Am I not convinced of the non-existence of a Deity? Am I not convinced that death will but render this soul more free, more unfettered? (p. 100)

Zastrozzi's conviction is a moot point. Reconciling his apparent atheism with belief in hell (p. 102) is certainly no easy matter, but unless we assume a convenient schizophrenic delusion or a wilful act of doublethink – allowing him to be simultaneously an atheist and conventional Christian – we can only assume that he is no description of Christian. For he evidently believes that his entirely amoral life will not bring him to damnation, whereas Verezzi's tragic lapse from virtue will

leave him 'hell-doomed to all eternity'. Zastrozzi's assumptions are certainly somewhat wishful, but nevertheless pertinent: for having lived a single-minded existence devoid of pleasure or 'true' love, he has no attachment to corporeal life whatsoever. As he states, 'all I have to do on earth is completed'. Verezzi, by contrast, kills himself in a frenzy of futile passions, despairing at his revealed lust and the barrier it has erected between him and Julia. In such a condition of obsessive, unfulfilled desire, his soul would certainly be greatly hindered in the reaching for heaven, in Plato's terms:

'But, I suppose, if at the time of its release the soul is tainted and impure, because it has always associated with the body and cared for it and loved it, and has been so beguiled by the body and its passions and pleasures that nothing seems real to it but those physical things which can be touched and seen and eaten and drunk and used for sexual enjoyment [...] do you think that it will escape independent and uncontaminated?'

'That would be quite impossible,' (*Phaedo*, p. 133)

In point of fact, Socrates is rather more merciful on the earth-bound soul than Zastrozzi, but does condemn it to a futile (if temporary) spectral existence (such as that of the debauched murderess Beatrice 'Bleeding Nun' de la Cisternas in *The Monk*), followed by a humiliating bestial reincarnation. Assuming that Zastrozzi is a 'perverse Platonist',<sup>93</sup> he has inflicted a potent revenge, and having fulfilled his purpose may encounter 'annihilation' with, as he claims, Socratic 'tranquillity'.<sup>94</sup> His optimism is hardly justified when one recalls that his violence has always been, by his own admission, an aggressive channelling of his sexual desire. The fact that Zastrozzi dies

<sup>93</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Stuart Curran, *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p. 119, in reference to Francesco Cenci. If it is insisted that Shelley's reading of Plato even in translated form did not begin in earnest until after the writing of *Zastrozzi* (See Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London, New York: Routledge, E P Dutton & Co, 1906), pp. 120-1) I would at least argue that Shelley's interest in, and interpretation of the Gothic genre was influential in encouraging his interest in, and borrowings from the Platonic dialogues.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *The Apology*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, pp. 74-5.

under torture with the same ‘exulting’ passion as his lust-enslaved victims (p. 103), which is a far cry from ‘tranquillity’, enforces that fatal sadomasochistic connection between sexuality and destruction that has dominated his life and appears to claim him at death. Zastrozzi envisions himself dying like a Manfred, but this morbid anticlimax suggests a final reckoning more in common with the deaths of Lewis’ Ambrosio and Dacre’s Victoria. In the words of Maggie Kilgour:

The individual discovers once more that he is not the author of his own narrative but only a character; the plotter has been part of a larger plot. He is the victim of social, natural, and finally supernatural agents, who in the end all conspire against him to expose his illusions about his own powers of self-determination.<sup>95</sup>

The reference specifically relates to Ambrosio, the supernatural being conspicuous in *Zastrozzi* by its absence. Matilda casts passing glances to the spirit-world with her sudden vision-inspired Christian conversion and with her prophetic dream (p. 71) that lays bare the destruction instinct behind her Eros.<sup>96</sup> The lack of supernatural elements in a novel so closely derived from Lewis and Dacre – particularly in light of Shelley’s poetic borrowings from Lewis in *Original Poetry of Victor and Cazire*, which by no means shun ‘enchantments and witchcraft’ – we may

<sup>95</sup> *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, p. 163.

<sup>96</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), pp.46-7.

The manifestations of Eros were conspicuous and audible enough; one might assume that the death instinct worked silently within the organism towards its disintegration, but that, of course, was no proof. The idea that part of the instinct became directed towards the outer world and then showed itself as an instinct of aggression and destruction carried us a step further. The instinct would thus itself have been pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism would be destroying something animate or inanimate outside itself instead of itself. [...] Sadism, long since known to us as a component-instinct of sexuality, would represent a particularly strong admixture of the instinct of destruction into the love impulse; while its counterpart, masochism, would be an alliance between sexuality and the destruction at work within the self, in consequence of which the otherwise imperceptible destructive trend became directly evident and palpable.

The conjunction of destruction, self-destruction and sexuality proves of considerable significance in studies of Shelley, and *Zastrozzi* provides a prototype. Matilda is unmistakably sadistic, Verezzi masochistic, and Zastrozzi (proving himself not only a proto-Beatrice and a proto-Cenci, but touching upon the negative aspects of a proto-Prometheus) unmistakably both.

assume to be no accidental gesture. The poems in question – ‘Ghasta; or The Avenging Demon!!!’ and ‘Revenge’ – are furthermore notable for their central themes of seduction and extreme reprisals, very much akin to the scheme of *Zastrozzi*.

‘Ghasta’ retells (or plagiarises) the Bleeding Nun episode of *The Monk*, with one extremely significant twist: as opposed to the distant family connection between the original spectre and Don Raymond, the tormented warrior and ‘Phantom of Theresa’ (165) were related respectively as seducer and victim, and vice versa since her death. Lack of originality aside, the scenes from Lewis lend themselves well to Shelley’s purpose. Whereas there is no indication that Lewis’ Don Raymond had ever been anything more than the rather naïve and ineffectual character encountered by the Bleeding Nun, the ‘fleeting false Rodolph’ (l. 175) is designated as having been very conventionally masculine in a former state: a warrior and seducer,<sup>97</sup> epitomising aggression and libido. His condition in ‘Ghasta’, submissive, terrified and sexually ‘claimed’ by his erstwhile victim, is most decidedly the Gothic feminine stance.

This posthumous reversal enacts essentially the same revenge as Olivia Zastrozzi’s: paying back her seducer with an even deadlier demonstration of phallic mastery than she had suffered at his hands. The agent she employs in this case is a more potent symbol of masculine oppression than Zastrozzi, though his relationship to the power nexus is very similar. The Wandering Jew of ‘Ghasta,’ as opposed to the vitriolic rebel of *Queen Mab*,<sup>98</sup> is very much after the type of Lewis’ character: the obedient servant of God whom he once offended, now committed to God’s bidding; both victim and agent of an omnipotent patriarchal system, or ‘God’s eternal ire’ (l. 192) as Shelley here depicts. Notwithstanding Shelley’s views on seduction,<sup>99</sup> which might appear to advocate some

<sup>97</sup> As Shelley would later define, there could hardly be a worse combination: ‘A soldier is a man whose business it is to kill those who never offended him, and who are the innocent martyrs of other men’s iniquities. [...] it seems impossible that the soldier should not be a depraved and unnatural being.’ (Note to *Queen Mab*, IV. 178-9, in *POS*, pp. 361-2 (p. 362))

<sup>98</sup> *Queen Mab*, VII. ll. 84-266.

<sup>99</sup> See *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 56.

When, in the summer of 1812, Shelley writes to James Henry Lawrence [...], he reveals an intensely personal stake in the ongoing critique of masculine desire. Justifying his current capitulation to social convention (he and Harriet Westbrook had been married a year), Shelley writes, “seduction, which term could have no meaning, in a rational society, has now a most tremendous one . . . If there is any

punishment for ‘false fleeting Rodolph’, the divine wrath of ‘Ghastia’ proves excessive, indiscriminating, and arbitrary in its judgement, prefiguring the sadistic deity of *Queen Mab* and the scourge-wielding patriarch worshipped by Francesco Cenci. No more benevolence is extended to the wronged Theresa than to her seducer: both are despatched to ‘the cells of death’ (l. 180) by the ruthless power they have called into being. Having actively participated in the destructive pattern of sex-as-power, the shared extremity of their punishment illustrates the pervasive nature of this social malaise: one cannot be innocently involved in the pursuit of phallic power even for the sake of ‘justice’. The passion for revenge, as in *Zastrozzi*, proves as necrotic as ‘unintellectual sensuality’: both aim at the physical or psychological destruction of others, and deaden the souls of their practitioners to the higher faculties, among which we may number reason and Platonic Eros. Both thus spend eternity in their appropriate domain: ‘In the mouldering tomb’ (l. 182).

Ironically, it is the poem actually entitled ‘Revenge’ that contains the most distastefully arbitrary depiction of post-mortal ‘justice’ in Shelley’s canon, even including Beatrice Cenci’s visions of eternal rape.<sup>100</sup> ‘Revenge’ echoes, with increased sadism, another ill-fated union of *The Monk* – that of ‘ALONZO THE BRAVE AND FAIR IMOGINE’ (pp. 270-3) – but contains a supernatural version of the plot of *Zastrozzi*. The false lover Imogine is replaced by Agnes: a brave and selfless figure who accompanies her equally brave and selfless lover Adolphus to the tomb of Conrad, whose spirit has commanded Adolphus to bring her there on pain of death. In spite of this, he only agrees at her urging, and having no intimation of Conrad’s intentions, cannot be held to blame for the dire consequences. For once, neither lover appears to merit their fate.

Conrad, unfortunately, is a post-mortal version of *Zastrozzi*, whose mother was seduced by Adolphus’ father. Having failed to exact his revenge in life, he has received the help of an atypically powerful fiend to deprive Adolphus of his devoted Agnes: ‘I’ll drag her to Hades all blooming in

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enormous and desolating crime, of which I should shudder to be accused, it is seduction” [...] the baneful *Doppelgänger* in his imaginative works emerged from his deep suspicions about his own sex, a sex all too capable of seduction and of coupling with prostitutes [...] as well as of the most horrific sexual violence, as powerfully displayed by the tragic history of the Cenci family.

<sup>100</sup> *The Cenci*, V.iv, ll. 47-74.

charms,/ On the black whirlwind's thundering pinion I'll ride,/ And fierce yelling fiends shall exult o'er thy bride—'. Recalling that the word 'exult' is distressingly close to being a synonym for 'orgasm' in *Zastrozzi* only adds to the revolting impact of this image. The subsequent death-of-sensibility of Adolphus forms a comparatively peaceful anticlimax. This singularly unjust episode could serve to illustrate the horrendous implications of Wollstonecraft's patriarchy, in which women are so totally under the control of the 'tyrants and sensualists' that they have even been forced into the dangerous position of having little or no control over the development (and consequently, post-mortals fate) of their own souls.<sup>101</sup> Conrad's reduction of Agnes to a nameless unit of value – Adolphus' 'best loved' (l. 53) – further indicates his reduction of 'love' to masculine power-struggle for the most valuable sexual objects, in which the identity of the woman herself is not even acknowledged.

Nevertheless, the realisation of such complete injustice is extremely distasteful, and goes beyond anything that is to be found in Lewis or in Dacre. An innocent young woman being killed with the complicity of Hell is practically a commonplace, but for her to be dragged down to eternal ravishment in Hell without even a hint of complaint from the powers of Heaven is a very morbid novelty. On the other hand, the stubborn passivity of the powers of Heaven, whilst Satan works for the death and destruction of all and sundry, is glaringly obvious in both *The Monk* and *Zofloya*.

Judging from his letter of April 23, 1810 to Edward Fergus Graham,<sup>102</sup> Shelley was fully aware of

<sup>101</sup> See *Rights of Woman*, p. 122.

Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth. [...] More or less may be conspicuous in one being than another; but the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet outwardly ornamented with elaborate care, and so adorned to delight man, 'that with honour he may love', the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust.

<sup>102</sup> *Letters I*, p. 10:

The avenue is composed of vegetable substances moulded in the form of trees called by the multitude Elm trees. [...] Stalk along the road towards them—and mind and keep yourself concealed as my Mother brings a blood-stained stiletto which she purposes to make you bathe in the life-blood of her enemy.

Never mind the Death-demons, and skeletons dripping with the putrefaction of the grave, that occasionally may blast your straining eyeball.— Persevere even though Hell and destruction should yawn beneath your feet.



the Gothic genre's vulnerability to accusations of sheer absurdity, and its arbitrary nature in dealing out horrors and torments to characters both deserving and undeserving. 'Revenge' may thus be an ultra-sadistic parody of a sadistic genre. Shelley would never very closely repeat this cynical statement, which appears to affirm the posthumous power of 'tyrants and sensualists', although *The Cenci* would reiterate the loathsome image in Beatrice's (no doubt spurious) delirium (*The Cenci*, V. iv. 63-7).

Shelley may, therefore, have omitted the supernatural from *Zastrozzi* in part due to its arbitrary nature as a source of evil: it inevitably goes some way to mitigating the blame that is either due to the individual evil-doer or to the human-built system of corruption, the latter of which is exposed in the *dénouement* of *Zastrozzi*. It is also possible, however, that it was also omitted due to the secularism of Shelley's early work. In spite of the passivity of God in Lewis' and Dacre's novels, they eventually serve to reaffirm the Christian scheme, and within this genre the concept of non-Christian supernaturalism is practically unthinkable. That is left for Shelley to achieve, but not as yet, within the bounds of an imitation of Lewis and Dacre. Nevertheless, he does not allow his main characters the device of sharing responsibility with the figure of an omnipotent evil, nor does he permit his fictional society to assign its ills to the same figure. For those ills have been carefully nurtured by 'society, [...] the pure and virtuous matron', and it must thus recognise its own illegitimate progeny.

Nevertheless, *Zastrozzi* hardly seems to be an attempt at revolutionising the genre. 'Ghast' and 'Revenge', complete with their supernatural trappings, appear even less so, and all three works – not to mention *St Irvyne* – are thoroughly steeped in the pseudo-Continental (and frequently borrowed) names and sensually depraved Continental backdrops of Lewis, Dacre and Radcliffe.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> See Jacqueline Howard, *Reading Gothic Fiction: A Bakhtinian Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp.109-10:

Given the polarization of public opinion over the events in France and, once England had declared war, the ease with which radical opinions could be represented as disloyalty, it must have been difficult for readers and writers of the 1790's to engage with literature independently of an awareness of contemporary, possibly subversive, ideologies. [...] *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Monk*, and *The Italian* were not to explicit about political matters; but they were set in southern France and Italy where,

Considering the largely reactionary politics of the British government throughout Shelley's life, it is certainly not surprising that he would continue in this tradition of displacement, as if the corrupt nexus of power and sexuality was a purely Continental and Catholic invention. Wollstonecraft had certainly earned no contemporary literary plaudits for insisting otherwise. It should be noted that this scheme does not translate at all well into an explanation of the Italian setting of *The Cenci*, based upon historical events in Italy. *Laon and Cythna*, on the other hand, displays a possible legacy of this technique: displacement is taken to a greater remove – a corrupt and tyrannical Orient – at the point where it becomes too controversial to positively portray either political or sexual revolutions within Europe (never mind within Britain or France). In spite of this conscious 'othering', committed in the knowledge that the vices depicted were endemic to his native culture, Shelley nevertheless found particularly corrupt entities within his chosen settings that became epitomes of his social and sexual critiques: the seraglio of the Oriental tyrant (also referred to by Wollstonecraft) and that favourite of 1790's Gothic authors; the corrupt, sensual and materialistic Catholic church and its sadistic Inquisition. Interestingly, the inquisitors of *Zastrozzi*, whilst characterised as 'stern' (p. 93), are not the inhuman, unfeeling torturers of *The Monk*, *The Italian*, and, indeed, *The Cenci*, where Shelley depicts evil in its most infectious and soul-deadening nature. For the purposes of *Zastrozzi*, however, he is even prepared to allow a dedicated senior operative of political-religious oppression a degree of susceptibility to the redemptive powers of Platonic Eros: '[Matilda's] extreme beauty softened the inquisitor who had spoken last. He little thought that, under a form so celestial, so interesting, lurked a heart depraved, vicious as a demon's.' (p. 95) His observational mistake aside, the image of a Gothic inquisitor bereft of cruelty and suspicion through the contemplation of beauty proves the single most optimistic moment within *Zastrozzi*. For a moment, the possibility exists of a society not

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in Sir Walter Scott's words of 1824, 'feudal tyranny and Catholic superstition still continue to exercise their sway over the slave and bigot, and to indulge the haughty lord, or more haughty priest, that sort of despotic power, the exercise of which seldom fails to deprave the heart and disorder the judgement.' More significantly, perhaps, the social values, manners, and practices represented often did not correspond with the period designated by the author. So, while this dubious historicity and the fairy-tale stylization of characters did function at one level as distancing, 'fantasy' devices, readers could still recognize, in the characters and situations portrayed, elements which they might use in conceiving of themselves and their own social relations.

based upon the predatory, fatal competitions of ‘tyrants and sensualists’.

The society of *The Cenci*, however, will not even tolerate the possibility of such alternatives. This later work provides the clearest demonstration of Shelley’s continued Gothic inheritance in his major works, elevating the pervasive moral decay of *Zastrozzi* and ‘Revenge’ into a fully-developed vision of a whole society in a state of ethical and spiritual necrosis. The post-Lewis Gothic novel’s tendency to launch deadly strikes at guilty and innocent alike, though the latter in far greater number, and explicitly by way of corrupt sexual power-plays, was more than Shelley cared to abandon even in his mature years. Evidently, as for Wollstonecraft, it proved too good a paradigm for contemporary society.

## II

**‘The Rack’s Kiss’:*****The Cenci* – The tragedy of social stability**

Within Shelley’s major works Count Francesco Cenci is the clear and deliberate exemplar of sexuality incorporating death and decay. His acts of depravity are undertaken with a Zastrozzi-like cynicism which, to a degree, sets him apart from the typical ‘slavish’ Shelleyan tyrant: death and decay are not the symptoms of his morbid passion but the ends. Socrates’ depiction of the sensual ‘lover’ in the *Phaedrus* could serve for a condensed biography of the young Francesco Cenci:

The man who is under the sway of desire and a slave of pleasure will inevitably try to derive the greatest pleasure possible from the object of his passion. Now a man in a morbid state finds pleasure in complete absence of opposition, and detests any appearance of superiority or equality in his darling; he will always do his best to keep him in a state of inferiority or subservience. [...] it is far better to yield to a non-lover who is in his sober senses than to a lover who from the very nature of things is bound to be out of his mind. The alternative is to put oneself in the power of a man who is faithless, morose, jealous, and disagreeable, who will do harm to one’s estate, harm to one’s physical health, and harm above all to one’s spiritual development [...].<sup>104</sup>

Cenci confuses pleasure and power in the sexual nexus and trades their places at the onset of age and diseased infirmity, when the former is no longer an option. ‘What are the cold, or feverish caresses of appetite’, enquires Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘but sin embracing death [...]?’<sup>105</sup> Francesco Cenci’s career ultimately stands in support of this, but his relentless pursuit of his ‘appetite’ to the

<sup>104</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 38-41.

<sup>105</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 264.

greatest extreme, paradoxically, represents a struggle for immortality.

On the same subject, it is as well to consider some lesser sensualists: Matilda and Othman (from *Laon and Cythna*) both lack Count Cenci's cynical astuteness, by which he consciously embraces the analogy of morbid passion and destructive power. It is equally inescapable for these sadists, but neither demonstrates a bold willingness to face the Gothic horrors they create: Matilda is subject to nightmares, whereas Cenci has every confidence that 'Conscience' will not disturb his repose (IV. i. 177-82), and Othman flees 'aghast and pale' (*Laon and Cythna*, Canto VII, 2883) from Cythna's madness – the ghastly consequence of his act of rape. Sensuality remains an end in itself for these degraded figures, although their delusion of pleasure is clearly depicted as an addiction to power and possession. Cenci has no delusions of pleasure and consciously operates to pervert and destroy it for others in all forms other than morbid sado-masochism, and that only that he may glory in their willing humiliation and damnation: '[...] for what she most abhors/ Shall have a fascination to entrap/ Her loathing will [...]' (IV. i. 85-7).

Yet Cenci has a major delusion: his violently egotistic Catholicism (or possibly Catholic egotism), and this alteration of the original text<sup>106</sup> demonstrates a tendency to emphasise the Gothic in a historical source containing most of the stock elements: a solipsistic megalomaniac of the highest order, an Italian setting, hired assassins, an isolated castle stronghold of which Ann Radcliffe would have approved and the Holy Inquisition. That Shelley considered it necessary to place Catholicism at the very heart of the play's corruption is surely no mere afterthought, and may be considered a distant legacy of *The Monk*. Ambrosio is a criminal by the official standards of Madrid society, which is accurately mirrored in the microcosm of his ecclesiastical society, but as a powerful member of the presiding Catholic institution he does not lack the means to indulge his appetites whilst avoiding exposure. The system thus serves to abet and to conceal corruption, as is

<sup>106</sup> See *Scorpions Ringed with Fire*:

The original Count was an atheist. In Shelley's play he becomes a perversely devout Catholic – which, to be sure, for many an Englishman was little better. Still, in the end this makes Beatrice's world all the more terrifying, for Cenci's identification of himself with God suggests to the girl that the devil whom Cenci worships in the name of God may, indeed, rule the fortunes of the world. (p.43)

also depicted in the falsified death and subsequent imprisonment of Agnes. Society is discovered in such an attitude at the very opening of *The Cenci*, as the helpless lackey Camillo informs Count Cenci that:

That matter of the murder is hushed up  
 If you consent to yield his Holiness  
 Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate. (I. i. 1-3)

Cenci's crimes are thus more or less encouraged by society, as he sardonically affirms (II. 27-32). Catholicism as represented by the hypocritical Pope Clement is a ruthless and acquisitive entity contemptuous of the weak and dedicated to attaining a monopoly of power. Sexual corruption is prevalent: Pope Clement himself has apparently sired illegitimate sons<sup>107</sup> and seems amenable to allowing Orsino similar laxity with his 'priestly vow', albeit for a substantial fee (I. ii. 63-6). These supposed guardians of virtue and exemplars of chastity are thus no more above Cenci's judgement of the human disposition in general than Orsino is in particular:

All men delight in sensual luxury,  
 All men enjoy revenge, and most exult  
 Over the tortures they can never feel—  
 Flattering their secret peace with others' pain. (I. i. 77-80)

If this awareness of sinful potentiality<sup>108</sup> develops into the assumption of inherent evil – an

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<sup>107</sup> *PP*, p.243, n.9. 'The illegitimate children of Roman Catholic clergy were euphemistically called "nephews" and "nieces".' Cf. I.i, 16; V.iv, 24. The euphemisms could also refer to lovers. See Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Last Blossom', in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (London and Glasgow: Blackie and Son Ltd, ND), p. 181: 'Who knows a woman's wild caprice?/ It played with Goethe's silvered hair,/ And many a Holy Father's "niece"/ Has softly smoothed the papal chair.'

<sup>108</sup> I am indebted to Wasserman's reading of *The Cenci*, developing Orsino's opinion in II. ii. 108-18 that 'self-anatomy' is the tragic flaw of the Cenci family. Earl R Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 84-128.

ideology encouraged by the doctrine of Original Sin – it invites the danger of accepting the inevitability of evil, and thus seems a recipe for anarchy. Ironically, this argument for ruthless individualistic chaos is the foundation of society in *The Cenci*, which is a singular example of a major Romantic text in which two anti-heroes – one relentless egomaniac<sup>109</sup> and one more or less wrongfully persecuted pariah – prove hopelessly embedded in the processes of society in spite of their efforts to over-reach.

Shelley's Count Cenci – an insane yet calculating Italian patriarch whose genuine religious convictions prove not the slightest deterrence in a damnation-courting career<sup>110</sup> – is a figure of unmistakably Gothic qualities, yet does not fit the strict pattern of such 'masculine' Gothic anti-heroes as Lewis' Ambrosio and Dacre's Victoria. Maggie Kilgour opposes this 'masculine' model to the passive 'female pattern' of Radcliffe's heroines and defines it thus:

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Because of the defect in the human constitution, at some level of his mind man must, if incited, feel such emotions as revenge and sensuality; but self-knowledge reveals that the will, by stoically sublimating them, can prevent their entering consciousness, where they would act as irresistible motives. Self-anatomy – Shelley's substitute for the vainglorious or forbidden knowledge which is the traditional opposite of self-knowledge – teaches what may be done as a consequence of these necessary thoughts and leads to self-contempt by luring one to reconcile himself with these thoughts and hence to carry them out. (p.111)

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p.75-6 for the depiction of Count Cenci as a perverted version of the Romantic hero:

[...] Cenci embodies the disease of the Romantic spirit more literally than Dr. Johnson could have intended when he defined it as "that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life." In Cenci Shelley explores the dangerous solipsism of Romantic values, perverted if pursued to their extreme. [...] Cenci's purpose, [...] if it is revolutionary, is also tyrannical; not a search for the means by which the self and society can be reintegrated, but for those by which he can exert his power over the social order, recreating the self at the expense of society.

His project is thus doomed to failure by his assumption that the social order, such as it is, of his world is based upon a less diabolical platform than his own patriarchal hellfire philosophy. Society has created him more or less as we find him and is not so embarrassed at his anti-social exhibitionism that it is not careful to profit by it, until Cenci's usefulness expires.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Shelley's Preface to *The Cenci* (PP, pp. 238-42):

Religion coexists, as it were, in the mind of an Italian Catholic with a faith in that of which all men have the most certain knowledge. It is interwoven with the whole fabric of life. It is adoration, faith, submission, penitence, blind admiration; not a rule for moral conduct. [...] Religion pervades intensely the whole frame of society, and is according to the temper of the mind which it inhabits, a passion, a persuasion, an excuse, a refuge; never a check. (p. 241)

This certainly applies in relation to *The Monk*. Ambrosio's persistence in sin, even upon multiple proofs of damnation, would be far more heroic were it not for his sharing Cenci's belief that 'Repentance is an easy moment's work' (IV. i. 42) right up to the end.

In the tradition of the male gothic the focus of the narrative is on the individual as satanic revolutionary superman, who is so extremely alienated that he cannot be integrated into society. [...] The male hero achieves what is commonly seen as the goal of male development: autonomy; [...].<sup>111</sup>

But as far as *The Cenci* is concerned with this paradigm, Count Cenci could not be further removed from heroic status. For his society has no need to integrate him: its guardians profit by his criminal efforts at ‘autonomy’ whilst retaining the ability to check him with threats and, ultimately, punitive legal action. Social cohesion in *The Cenci* goes no further than institutional monitoring and influencing of the process of disintegration that asserts the existing hierarchy. Crime is tolerated, as long as the criminal does not attempt to lift the veil of society, ‘the pure and virtuous matron’, to expose the underlying anarchy. Egotism is taken for granted, but individualists who have not proven skilful or careful enough to preserve a socially-acceptable façade are eliminated. The world of *The Cenci* is one of individualists,<sup>112</sup> and Count Cenci’s cynical self-awareness is counterbalanced by his failure to recognise that he remains a subordinate mirror of the institutional tyranny that can remove him at a stroke. For all his monumental efforts and delusions of godhood, the tyrant and sensualist remains a slave. In his youth he is the slave of passion, until receiving that ironic check due to all lovers of the flesh: its decay, which deprives the sensualist of his *raison d’être*.

Deprived of such ‘honey sweets’ (I. i. 104), Cenci has taken a traditional resource of old age:

<sup>111</sup> *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 37-8.

<sup>112</sup> Shelley’s depiction of balanced anarchy foreshadows Freud’s view of the negative function of civilisation (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, pp. 40-1):

The existence of this tendency to aggression which we can detect in ourselves and rightly presume to be present in others is the factor that disturbs our relations with our neighbours and makes it necessary for culture to institute its high demands. Civilized society is perpetually menaced with disintegration through this primary hostility of men towards one another [...] Hence its system of methods by which mankind is to be driven to identifications and aim-inhibited love-relationships; hence the restrictions on sexual life; and hence, too, its ideal command to love one’s neighbour as oneself [...] Civilization expects to prevent the worst atrocities of brutal violence by taking upon itself the right to employ violence against criminals, but the law is not able to lay hands on the more discreet and subtle forms in which human aggressions are expressed.



following a riotous, vitiating youth, he turns to spirituality. The prevailing ideology, however, merely confirms him in his belief of the inevitability of evil ('[...] for Adam made all so,' I. iii. 12) and furthermore is represented by a decadent clergy who Cenci realises have neither skill nor grace to assist his salvation (I. i. 26-7). He thus assumes the priestly role of intercessor, augmenting his power in compensation for lost pleasures (which, as far as the Gothic genre and the *Phaedrus*<sup>113</sup> are concerned, were expressions of his power in the first place). Mutuality is not a concept he entertains: like Socrates' sensualist 'lover', his only interest in relationships is to dominate, establishing his own power by lowering others beneath his condition. If pleasure is now beyond him, he may at least 'exult/ Over the tortures [he] can never feel' by imposing them on his family. If there seems little chance of his own salvation, he can at least endeavour to make sure that there is no chance of Beatrice's.

His early devotion to sensuality traps him in a predatory world view that distorts his spiritual quest from potentially idealistic ends. Having dismissed the rest of humanity as mere prey, Cenci seeks the figure of his antitype directly in the divine, whilst lacking any conception of such power except what he has absorbed through corrupt institutions, sordid life experience and cynical preconceptions. Inevitably, 'The Form he saw and worshipped was his own' (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII, l. 3247), to coin Cythna's phrase. Though Cenci may, indeed, have recognised how he has wasted his youth in dangerously unambitious, earth-bound pursuits, his subsequent impatience to identify with God vastly over-reaches his ability, leaving him with no better plan to assert his immortality than by his accustomed enforcement of negative contrasts: he can prove in himself an innate superiority of spirit by the subjection and damnation of Beatrice's spirit, clearly the better fitted for salvation and thus the ultimate subject to prove Cenci's faith in the weakness of virtue and inevitability of corruption.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, he commits that very same error encountered in Shelley's early Gothic productions:

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. p.37, n.1.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p.85. 'Cenci, old and failing, whose life consists solely in power, seeks restoration at the fountainhead of his daughter's spiritual annihilation, her concession to his absolute authority.'

preoccupied with the material signs of power, Cenci is hardly ready to embark on a spiritual quest. His eros distorted and his body possibly infected<sup>115</sup> by a life of sensuality enhanced with power-asserting violence, and his actions encouraged by the presence of an equally decadent and power-hungry clergy, his whole conception of spiritual immortality (to which he certainly aspires) is an eternal duplication of the physical. Count Cenci envisions an afterlife in which he can continue to exercise and assert his temporal power, which remains of the same destructive character that he has developed to enforce his presence in old age. The decline of his sexual desire is compensated for by a negative potency: the ability to use sexuality as an instrument of physical, psychological and spiritual torture, and to extend the results of this into eternity. For the only true distinction he makes between body and soul is the greater difficulty in destroying the latter, and he thus imagines Beatrice bearing the venereal scars of his ravishment before ‘the throne of God’ (IV. i. 93-5).

His negative achievement is greater than that of Zastrozzi, who had attempted to abjure sexuality in order to fully indulge his desire for revenge, not recognising that both desires emerged from the same source. Cenci, self-aware as in most matters, is quick to draw the link between his youthful sensuality, his brutal sadism, and his later, more insidious acts of sadism, calculated to deny his victims even a posthumous escape from his merciless dominion:

When I was young I thought of nothing else  
 But pleasure; and I fed on honey sweets:  
 Men, by St. Thomas! cannot live like bees,  
 And I grew tired: – yet, till I killed a foe,  
 And heard his groans, and heard his children’s groans,  
 Knew I not what delight was else on earth,

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<sup>115</sup> Crook and Guiton draw attention to the likelihood of Cenci’s diseased state, by the resemblance of the deformities he wishes upon Beatrice in at IV. i. 93-5 and 129-37 to advanced syphilis. ‘Having raped his daughter, the Count wishes the disease upon her. He hopes she will die “plague-spotted” and threatens “I will make / Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin.”’ (*Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 200)

Which now delights me little. I the rather  
 Look on such pains as terror ill conceals,  
 The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,  
 Which tell me that the spirit weeps within  
 Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ.<sup>116</sup> (I. i. 103-13)

Cenci has effectively eliminated pleasure from sexuality altogether and consciously accepted the bare residue of his lust, stripped of its sensual qualities – the compulsion for power – as the sole motive for life itself: ‘[...] but that there remains a deed to act/ Whose horror might make sharp an appetite/ Duller than mine – I’d do, – I know not what.’ (I. i. 100-2) The ‘voluptuous ... maddening love’ of *Zastrozzi* has even lost its anodyne function to a sick and weary man, accustomed to power, but perceiving its decay in physical, social and domestic terms. Youth and wealth seem in danger of departing in unison. He has lost the respect of his family and has good reason to fear their betrayal,<sup>117</sup> and even with the protection of ‘gold, the old man’s sword,’ (I. i. 127) the Papal drain on his coffers serves as a humiliating reminder of Cenci’s limitations and the need to at least preserve a socially acceptable front. Cenci – essentially ‘an honest man’<sup>118</sup> and certainly one given to appalling demonstrations of power as opposed to Machiavellian concealment – eventually neglects this nicety in staging a public black mass to dedicate his sons’ deaths, and is promptly indicted with ‘charges of the greatest import’ (IV. iv. 12). In this resolutely cynical society where negative restraint takes the

<sup>116</sup> Curran notes Shelley’s repetition of the imagery that closes this soliloquy, clearly relating it to the sexual assault. In the first scene following the rape, Beatrice declares ‘My eyes are full of blood’ (III. i. 2). Curran furthermore interprets this image as ‘a euphemism for her father’s semen’ (p. 116).

<sup>117</sup> See II. i. 130-48. The mutual contempt of the Cenci family features prominently in the original MS as recounted by Leigh Hunt (*The Indicator*, No. XLI, Wednesday, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1820) (*The Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 322):

Francesco hated these children. It is a dreadful thing to say so in so many words; but the cause is easily seen through. He led a life of the most odious profligacy, and was as full of sullenness as vice. His children were intelligent; their father’s example disgusted them; and he saw, and could not bear this contrast.

Thus we have good reason to assume that his outspoken self-assurance aside, Count Cenci is no more exempt from self-contempt than any other Shelleyan antihero.

<sup>118</sup> *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p. 72.

place of positive integration, a multitude of sins may be tolerated, but not those that openly threaten the illusory power-base (as Cenci does in pledging ‘the mighty Devil in Hell’ (I. iii. 83), publicly confounding God and the Devil and thus exposing the corruption of the religious institution that has so far protected him). Appearances are of greater import than realities.

It is a somewhat ironic reflection that upon publication of *The Cenci*, Shelley was himself upbraided in the *Edinburgh Monthly Review* (May 1820) for his lack of ‘regard for the just opinions of the world’ in dramatising such a tale.<sup>119</sup> The reviewer characterises him as possessing a morbid exhibitionism not far removed from that of his greatest figure of corruption, sexual or otherwise, and states:

It is absolutely impossible that any man in his sober mind should believe the dwelling upon such scenes of unnatural crime and horror can be productive of any good to any one person in the world – and [...] that which cannot do good, must, of necessity, tend to do evil.<sup>120</sup>

This argument is reminiscent of Wasserman’s analysis of negative self-anatomy in *The Cenci*: ‘[...] for it tempts our powers/ Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,/ Into the depth of darkest purposes:/ So Cenci fell into the pit [...]’ (II. ii. 111-4). It is distinctly opposed to Shelley’s stated opinion in the Preface, that ‘in proportion to the possession of’ knowledge of their

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<sup>119</sup> *The Romantics Reviewed*, Part C, Vol. I, p. 352. It is notable that this review appears to take exception to the publicising rather than the accuracy of the tragedy. In the midst of an intensely vitriolic review, and though admitting ‘some foundation for the story’, the *Literary Gazette* (April 1, 1820) expresses belief that the incestuous rape was ‘such a miracle of atrocity, as only this author, we think, could have conceived.’ (Vol. II, pp. 517-8) Even Shelley’s most positive response, by the *Theatrical Inquisitor* (April 1820), whilst acknowledging the horrific artistic brilliance of the device, is adamant ‘That “one with white hair and imperious brow” should satiate his hatred by an expedient of this sort, it is impossible to believe [...]’ (Vol. II, p. 844). Leigh Hunt provides a sinister contrast: ‘It has been thought by some, that Mr. Shelley’s tragedy must be an exaggeration. The fact is, that the historical narrative is much worse’ (Vol. II, p. 472).

<sup>120</sup> *The Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 347.

own ‘sympathies and antipathies’, ‘every human being is wise, just, sincere, tolerant and kind’,<sup>121</sup> though it is arguable that Shelley invites contrast and comparison with an antihero who is no less a perverse Romantic poet than a perverse Romantic hero.<sup>122</sup> Even as he proceeds in the same exposure of corruption, Cenci’s intention is diametrically opposed to his author’s: not to persuade his audience of the futility of such prevalent, destructive (and self-destructive) ideologies as morality based upon guilt<sup>123</sup> and authority based upon arbitrary rank, age and gender,<sup>124</sup> but to bring his audience to a despairing acceptance of such ideologies and to a state of masochistic self-contempt – his perverse alternative to classical catharsis. Instead of ‘communicating [...] intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature’<sup>125</sup> to the uninspired majority, the poet of spiritually dead, self-acknowledged sensuality desires only to drag them below his own degraded level, confirming his superiority and sparing him the need for guilt. The conception is patently Satanic, recalling Shelley’s reservations about Milton’s characterisation of this prototype Romantic rebel: ‘ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement’,<sup>126</sup> culminating in his

<sup>121</sup> *PP*, p. 240.

<sup>122</sup> For which argument I am indebted to Ronald L. Lemoncelli’s article: ‘Cenci as Corrupt Dramatic Poet’, in *English Language Notes*, vol. XVI (1978-79), pp. 103-17 (p. 104):

Since, as Shelley explains, [in *A Defence of Poetry*] poetry and morality are both products of the imagination, we might expect that an immoral person would produce immoral poetry. [...] the corrupt imagination of Count Cenci circumscribes Beatrice’s imagination, thereby duplicating its evil nature in her.

See *PP*, pp. 490-2 (*A Defence of Poetry*).

<sup>123</sup> Cf. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 51.

What means does civilization make use of to hold in check the aggressiveness that opposes it [...] The aggressiveness is introjected, *internalized*; in fact, it is sent back where it came from, i.e., directed against the ego. It is there taken over by a part of the ego that distinguishes itself from the rest as a super-ego, and now, in the form of *conscience*, exercises the same propensity to harsh aggressiveness against the ego that the ego would have liked to enjoy against others. The tension between the strict super-ego and the subordinate ego we call the *sense of guilt*; it manifests itself as the need for punishment.

<sup>124</sup> See Marjean D Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked: The Mentally Constructed Tyrannies in Dramas of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Joanna Baillie* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), pp. 95-124, for an ideological study of *The Cenci* (p. 95):

In *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley depicts theological and mythological systems dominated by powerful authority figures. [...] Both plays reveal, however, that the “ology” upon which governance exists is a humanly created fiction. [...] Authority figures – gods, popes, kings, and fathers – empowered by the creators of this fiction subsequently entrap and enslave those who created the fiction, or the “ology”, as a system to serve them.

<sup>125</sup> *A Defence of Poetry* (*PP*, p. 508).

<sup>126</sup> Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (*PP*, p. 133).

intention to artificially raise his own ruined status by levelling that of the human race. Thus, if Zastrozzi's nearest contemporary equivalent is to be found in *Psycho*, one might well suppose that the spirit of Francesco Cenci is resurrected for (and with) similar purposes in *The Exorcist*. To quote the original screenplay:

[...] the point is to make us despair, to reject our own humanity, [...] to see ourselves as ultimately bestial, as ultimately vile and putrescent; without dignity, ugly and unworthy. [...] belief in God [...] is finally a matter of love: of accepting the possibility that God could love *us*.<sup>127</sup>

Thus does Cenci revel in the helplessness and cowardice of Camillo and his guests, slander his son's character, and attempt to convince his wife and daughter of their inevitable damnation, taking far greater pains with the latter. His methods, subtler and more insidious than the irreligious, Swiftian shock-tactics of Blatty's infernal 'Legion' are nevertheless based upon the same foundation – that of degraded and transgressive sexuality. Shelley, however, not intending to exalt humanity over 'bestial' nature, locates the source of *The Cenci*'s degradation in the society he depicts. Sensuality alone is merely pitiable, spiritual masochism, as Verezzi of *Zastrozzi* demonstrates. Negative society, based upon individualism restrained by arbitrary patriarchies, generates the desire for power, then enforces patriarchal privilege by confounding it with the generative instinct. Thus, 'life is poisoned in its wells' (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3315).

Count Cenci's former dedication to lust is repellent, but pales in comparison to the complete distortion of the sexual instinct that characterises his later sadism. Every positive value is comprehensively overturned or parodied in an orgy of destruction and self-destruction: Count Cenci

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<sup>127</sup> William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist & Legion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 135 (The lines quoted are omitted from the film).

desires neither pleasure, sympathy nor even the basic purpose, to propagate the species. The children he has already fathered are considered wayward particles of his own being<sup>128</sup> which must either be brought under control or eliminated. His relentless egotism will not accept the possibility of a family surviving him except as a confirmation of his continuing dominance.

[...] Giacomo, I think, will find

Life a worse Hell than that beyond the grave:

Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate

Die in despair, blaspheming: to Bernardo,

He is so innocent, I will bequeath

The memory of these deeds, and make his youth

The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts

Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb. (IV. i. 47-54)

If Cenci leaves survivors, they must bear his ineradicable mark, but he is strongly inclined to destruction as the surest method of absolute control – at all events, where there is no greater purpose to fulfil. Nevertheless, his obsession with immortality has led him down more than one path, philosophical and physical, and in the proposed climactic set-piece of this corrupt showman's life, he intends to perversely fulfil all three approaches laid down in *The Symposium* for 'becoming, if ever a man can, immortal'.<sup>129</sup>

The least ambitious method 'to partake of immortality' (p. 89), in Plato's scheme, is physical

<sup>128</sup> '[...] this most specious mass of flesh,/ Which thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,/ This particle of my divided being;' (IV. i. 115-7).

<sup>129</sup> See Curran's description of Count Cenci as a 'perverse Platonist' (*Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p. 119).

reproduction: ‘Those whose creative instinct is physical have recourse to women [...] believing that by begetting children they can secure for themselves an immortal and blessed memory hereafter [...]’ (p. 90). Those of his children whom Cenci does not go out of his way to destroy he preserves to bear the damning, despair-inducing memory of his ‘omnipotence’, but he also permits himself the hope or fantasy of producing a child-reincarnation through Beatrice: herself, as he perceives, an antitype<sup>130</sup> of his own being. The child he envisions – virtually a new-born duplicate of himself – is thus not merely a ‘replacement’ for the sake of ‘a spurious appearance of uninterrupted identity’.<sup>131</sup> Such immortality would by no means be sufficient for Cenci’s overpowering ego. What he chiefly desires is the negation of his ideal antitype – his ‘bane’ and ‘disease’ (IV. i. 118) who threatens his egotistic power-base with the implication of his own imperfection and insufficiency: ‘[...] if her bright loveliness/ Was kindled to illumine this dark world; [...] reverse that doom!’ (121-27) Determined to enforce the validity of his ‘dark idolatry of self’ (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3390) and identify with this divine self-image alone, he sets himself the task of tearing Beatrice from this reluctantly-perceived pedestal as ‘a sacred type and image of loveliness and excellence’.<sup>132</sup> The child he envisages he describes as a negative antitype: ‘Her image mixed with what she most abhors,’ (IV. i. 148) sharing the malignant smile of its father/ grandfather (II. i. 20, IV. i. 149) and with the disturbing possibility that it will repeat Count Cenci’s ultimate transgression, or at all events, ‘It shall repay her care and pain with hate,/ Or what may else be more unnatural.’ (IV. i. 154-5) Cenci

<sup>130</sup> See ‘On Love’ (*PP*, 473-4):

We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.

His own self-contempt notwithstanding, Cenci is unwilling or unable to accept the possibility of ‘the nature of man’ triumphing over egotistic and bestial inclinations. The mere existence of confirmed virtue or selflessness threatens his entire significance of being – wholly based upon the possession and exercise of individual power – and thus he must refute such possibilities prior to the destruction of their originators.

<sup>131</sup> *Symposium*, p. 88-9.

<sup>132</sup> From Mary Shelley’s *Matilda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 179. Treatment of the theme of incest in *The Cenci* goes somewhat beyond Mary Shelley’s but there is significant correlation as regards the corrupting nature of male sexuality. *Matilda*’s father considers his daughter in the light of a Platonic ideal until the attentions of her lover reveal her possibilities as a sexual object, and what ‘must be thought, [...] may be done.’ His lapse into lust degenerates further into self-contempt and suicide. Cenci, determined to identify with his conception of the divine as pure power as opposed to Platonic beauty, actually sets forth to destroy and degrade the ideal and beautiful and thus remove all doubt concerning his ideology.



realises that ‘death [may] outspeed’ his purpose (68), as he fails in his attempt to rapidly duplicate in Beatrice his ‘fascination’ with incestuous sado-masochism (86). In the event of his death, the ‘wicked and deformed’ (151) demon-child of his fantasy could thus continue its father/ grandfather’s Satanic project of levelling Beatrice’s faith in virtue and fuelling her self-contempt. His depiction of the child as a ‘distorting mirror’ (147) of pure corruption also reverses the position of incomplete type<sup>133</sup> and ideal antitype, placing Beatrice in the vulnerable incomplete role, expending ‘care and pain’ to win the love of a child who is an exemplar of corruption. Cenci would also be confirmed as an exemplar of corruption. As far as possible, he would have appropriated and negated every potential loving relationship for Beatrice: with father, lover, or child. Met with ‘what she most abhors’ from all quarters, the ideal of beauty and virtue would be forced into acknowledging Cenci’s divine ideal: individualistic power at all costs.

The divinely-inspired lover, states Plato, ‘can never bring forth in ugliness’,<sup>134</sup> whereas Cenci, whose understanding of the divine is thoroughly corrupt and substitutes power for Platonic beauty, proposes exactly that, in a manner that will accurately parody the progress of the ideal lover. The hypothetical child would merely be a convenience. For:

there are some whose creative desire is of the soul, and who conceive spiritually, not physically [...] If you ask what that progeny is, it is wisdom and virtue in general; of this all poets and such craftsmen as have found out some new thing may be said to be begetters; but by far the greatest and fairest branch of wisdom is that which is

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<sup>133</sup> Term used in ‘On Love’: ‘We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness.’ (*PP*, p. 473) See also the speech of Aristophanes from *The Symposium*: ‘Originally, as I say, we were whole beings, before our wickedness caused us to be split by Zeus’ (p. 64):

It is from this distant epoch, then, that we may date the innate love which human beings feel for one another, the love which restores us to our ancient state by attempting to weld two beings into one [...] No one can suppose that it is mere physical enjoyment which causes the one to take such intense delight in the company of the other. It is clear that the soul of each has some other longing which it cannot express, but can only surmise and obscurely hint at. (62-3)

<sup>134</sup> *Symposium*, p. 91.

concerned with the due ordering of states and families, whose name is moderation and justice. [...] who would not envy them the children that they have left behind them, children whose qualities have won immortal fame and glory for their parents?<sup>135</sup>

As a consummate corrupt artist and statesman, Cenci spares no effort to secure immortal infamy and dread, exhibiting his depravity and power before the notables of Rome and clearly intending to publicise his crowning violation of the accepted good. He realises, of course, that this will work as much to Beatrice's suffering as to his immortality: 'She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon/ Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad,' (IV. i. 82-3) and when 'she appears to others' (88) in the same light of contempt that Cenci intends to instil in her against herself, the image of ideal beauty degraded to the nature of corruption and vice will stand as his poetic masterpiece. The 'new thing' he will reveal will be the precise antithesis of poetic purpose as laid down by Shelley:

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted context which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. The great secret of morals is Love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.<sup>136</sup>

Cenci's career is calculated to lift a veneer of hypocritical civilisation to discover pure egotism and anarchy ('All men delight, in sensual luxury [...] enjoy revenge [...] exult/ Over the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-1.

<sup>136</sup> *Defence of Poetry* (PP, p. 487).

tortures they can never feel'). To this end, he labours to degrade 'familiar objects' – including Beatrice and Giacomo,<sup>137</sup> and the very concept and value of virtue – until they inspire disgust, hatred or hopelessness, and reproduce the redefined perceptions of the world after his own conception of 'the eternal, the infinite, and the one.'<sup>138</sup> For Cenci's God is no 'gentle and exalted context' but the omnipotent champion of egotism: 'He does his will, I mine!' (IV. i. 139)

In begetting 'spiritual children' to outlast him, Cenci enjoys some success, as Beatrice's nihilistic reflections in the final act betray: 'If there should be/ No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world; [...] If all things then should be ... my father's spirit' (V. iv. 57-60). In attaining the 'perfect revelation'<sup>139</sup> in the quest for immortality, however, Cenci oversteps the limits of his egotistic ideology and reveals not only that he has been committing spiritual suicide, but that he has even failed to distinguish himself as an individual. 'Evil minds/ Change good to their own nature,'<sup>140</sup> as Cenci is very well aware, but not so that he recognises himself as a product of a pre-existing ideology. Even as Orsino fails to realise that Cenci is pursuing evil to an extreme almost for its own sake, his casual listing of apparently commonplace sins provides no reassurance that Cenci is a remarkable anomaly in his society:

<sup>137</sup> Although the efforts Cenci expends on Giacomo are by no means so insidious as those used to fundamentally degrade Beatrice, he is at least intent that Giacomo should 'appear to others' in as corrupt a light as one might expect from a youthful Cenci: his 'brief yet specious tale' of Giacomo squandering his wife's dowry in 'secret riot' (III. i. 319-20) could easily be a recollection from the Count's 'dark and fiery youth' (I. i. 49).

<sup>138</sup> *Defence*, p. 483.

<sup>139</sup> *Symposium*, p. 92. Cenci again applies a depraved reversal. 'The man who would pursue the right way to this goal must begin, when he is young, by applying himself to the contemplation of physical beauty,' but Cenci begins with physical lust, and continues until he finds there is no turning back. The ideal lover needs must proceed spiritually, 'to reckon beauty of soul more valuable than beauty of body'. Cenci discovers that power over souls is profoundly more satisfying than merely over bodies. The next ideal stage 'is the contemplation of absolute [divine] beauty' (94), and the ability (95):

to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved of God, and becoming, if ever man can, immortal himself.

Reading 'power' for 'beauty' Cenci thus attempts to exercise his power after the fashion of God, but Cenci's God is an unnatural construction of society and his own self-contempt. Thus identifying with only the physical and ephemeral, Cenci engages in self-destruction.

<sup>140</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 380.

A man may stab his enemy, or his vassal,  
 And live a free life as to wine or women,  
 And with a peevish temper may return  
 To a dull home and rate his wife and children;  
 Daughters and wives call this, foul tyranny. (I. ii. 75-9)

This apparent clerical licence for Cenci's 'dark and fiery' youth inspires no optimism that his society offers any protection against a repetition of his Satanic career. Leigh Hunt offers a still more pessimistic appraisal of the author's society: 'We have thousands of Cencis among us in a lesser way, petty home tyrants [...] all the spoiled children of power, high and low, – the victims of indulged perversity and of an induced bad opinion of God and man.'<sup>141</sup> which suggests that whilst Shelley's 'home tyrant' differs in degree from this depraved multitude, he agrees in type. Cenci's worst crimes are certainly reserved for his family, and with both him and the established authority insisting that the father and husband is the absolute lord and master of his own household,<sup>142</sup> these could hardly be described as heroic transgressions of any description. Murder is casually bought off and 'hushed up'. Cenci's exhibitionism almost wins him the role of a rebel from the corrupt establishment that spawned him and preserves him, but after his arrest is averted by his untimely assassination, the establishment is quick to reinstate him as a champion of its values: 'Authority, and power, and hoary hair/ Are grown crimes capital' (V. iv. 23-4), as Pope Clement gibes, evidently more disturbed that the underlying principles of his own power-base have been assaulted by

<sup>141</sup> *Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 322.

<sup>142</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 266.

Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man [...] or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty. If the latter, it will be expedient to open a fresh trade with Russia for whips: a present which a father should always make to his son-in-law on his wedding day, that a husband may keep his whole family in order by the same means; and without any violation of justice reign, wielding this sceptre, sole master of his house, because he is the only thing in it who has reason: - the divine, indefeasible earthly sovereignty breathed into man by the master of the universe.

Beatrice's appropriation of the argument of divine justice<sup>143</sup> than from any true regret for the death of a man he had been intending to execute in any case. It is perhaps a mercy that Cenci does not survive to discover this, since the success of his perverse spiritual quest depends upon an ascent to and 'constant union with'<sup>144</sup> the form of absolute power. He boasts of his invulnerability to Camillo and the guests at his banquet, gauging his progress against the power in the hands of these authority figures. The failure of the establishment to check him on these occasions persuades Count Cenci that he has passed beyond its scope and become an unassailable authority in his own right. Although he still values money, which he defines as power – 'the old man's sword,' (I. i. 127) – he no longer values his wealth, political and sexual freedoms for any sensual pleasure they might afford him,<sup>145</sup> and expresses contempt for the corrupt circle of Pope Clement who are only too keen to reap the 'revenue' of Cenci's bribes and indulgences. (I. i. 15-34) He is also confident that these worldly tyrants will preserve him for the sake of their enrichment, in spite of his efforts to repudiate their real authority over his person. This 'philosophic tyrant' believes that his dedication to power as an end in itself sets him apart from the merely materialistic corruption he perceives in society, and identifies him with the ultimate arbitrary wielder of power: the patriarchal God. He never doubts that this God whom he so desperately strives to emulate is not in fact a creation of the very establishment he taunts, and thus that his power, however implemented, will always take after the nature of that worldly establishment. His 'absolute power' is thus an illusion, transmitted from and exercised on behalf of a wider – but certainly not a divine – system of patriarchy, that can overpower him as and when it pleases.

Caught up in worldly systems and delusions for all his efforts, Count Cenci, like Zastrozzi

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<sup>143</sup> Persuading the 'desperate wretch' (III. ii. 65) Marzio, for example, that as Cenci's assassin 'Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God/ To a just use.' (IV. iii. 54-5)

<sup>144</sup> *Symposium*, p. 95.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94:

This is the right way of approaching or being initiated into the mysteries of love, to begin with examples of beauty in this world, and using them as steps to ascend continually with that absolute beauty as one's aim [...] Once you have seen that, you will not value it in terms of gold or rich clothing or of the beauty of boys and young men [...]

before him, fails to attain superhuman status. Nevertheless, his aspirations at least mark him as considerably more human than Pope Clement, who wields an even greater, though similar, power with nothing of Cenci's passion or ambition. His sole motive appears to be a ruthless devotion to the status quo, which he upholds with an inhuman, robotic efficiency:

He looked as calm and keen as is the engine  
 Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself  
 From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,  
 A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.  
 He frowned, as if to frown had been the trick  
 Of his machinery, [...] (V. iv. 2-7)

Here is some advancement over Shelley's earlier epitome of the 'anarch'<sup>146</sup> – Othman of *Laon and Cythna* – who is described in dehumanising terms, but with emphasis on the bestiality of his degraded nature: 'A king, a heartless beast, a pageant and a name' (*Laon and Cythna*, VII, 2874). These titles also mark him as a creature of the established order (as is Pope Clement a 'rite, a law, a custom'), although the 'order' of his tyranny degenerates into anarchy in earnest. Anarchy, though a continually present force, is never thus realised in *The Cenci*, in which the leading tyrant surpasses the inhumanity of Othman: not even a 'heartless beast' but an efficient 'engine' of oppression and destruction. Like Cenci, he is committed to an ideology rather than sensual pleasures, but an ideology which has developed in the service of egotistic patriarchal pleasures. 'The sensualist,

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<sup>146</sup> Shelley's revealing term for the tyrant in 'Ode to Liberty': 'Anarchs and priests, who feed on gold and blood' (43). 'Anarch' is a Miltonic coinage (*Paradise Lost*, III, 988) describing Chaos: the abyss-dwelling entity who grants Satan passage to Earth to corrupt Adam and Eve, stating as its motivation 'Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain' (1009).

indeed, has been the most dangerous of tyrants,<sup>147</sup> and whilst the aged ‘marble form’ of Pope Clement hardly implies sensuality (although the presence of his ‘nephews’ suggests a past lifestyle not altogether different from Cenci’s youth), the comparison of him to ‘the engine/ Which tortures and which kills’ reveals the inherent sadism in the system he serves. The engine in question has featured prominently at V. i. 8-11 in a most disturbing analogy. Upon Marzio’s denial of murder, in spite of a previous session of torture, the First Judge declaims:

Dare you, with lips yet white from the rack’s kiss

Speak false? Is it so soft a questioner,

That you would bandy lover’s talk with it

Till it wind out your life and soul? [...]

Cenci’s career of corruption may be at an end, but this vampiric image reveals that his work continues. Incest may bear an official taboo – in which case it behoves the empowered few to practise it behind closed doors – but rape and sexual perversion are institutionalised. The professional sadism of the First Judge closely echoes Count Cenci: ‘Confess, or I will warp/ Your limbs with such keen tortures...’ (V. iii. 60-1) recalls Cenci’s curse, ‘warp those fine limbs/ To loathèd lameness!’ (IV. i. 133-4) and the correlation and significance is strengthened by Crook and Guiton’s interpretation of the image as a reference to the symptoms of syphilis.<sup>148</sup> As Cenci claims,

<sup>147</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 93.

<sup>148</sup> *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, pp. 15-6.

In up to thirty percent of cases it ‘burns itself out’. In another thirty, latency is permanent and symptomless, apart from general sub-health. For the remainder, the tertiary stage begins. This may start as little as a year after infection with ‘gummas’, [...] The body literally rots away. Some gummas attack the skin, the mucous membrane, the nose bridge and palate, producing collapse of the face, a hoarse voice and foul breath. [...] Osseous gummas can create outgrowths of diseased bone called ‘exostoses’ with resultant crippling.

This suggests medical motivation not only for Count Cenci’s choice of torment (which could hardly be more sadistic) but for his impatience and fear of impending death, if he believes himself to be in the ‘insidious,

‘most exult/ Over the tortures they can never feel’, and the attitude of the judges to the tortures they inflict recalls the grotesque auto-erotic connotation the word ‘exult’ carries in *Zastrozzi*. The sexuality of ‘tyrants and sensualists’ is always a selfish – and thus, in the scheme of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, a self-defeating affair, and the same applies to the creations and begetters of tyranny: the slaves: ‘[...] what a world we make,/ The oppressor and the oppressed...’ (V. iii. 74-5). The two classes are often confused in Shelley’s works, which is hardly surprising considering the venereal fluidity of this mutual corruption, but it is possible to reach a distinction between a dedicated ‘anarch’ such as Cenci and a devoted guardian of false social ideals such as the Judge and Pope Clement. Shelley again anticipates Freud:

The cultural super-ego has elaborated its ideals [...] under the name of *ethics*. [...] In our investigations and our therapy of the neuroses we cannot avoid finding fault with the super-ego of the individual on two counts: in commanding and prohibiting with such severity it troubles too little about the happiness of the ego, and it fails to take into account sufficiently the difficulties in the way of obeying it – the strength of instinctual cravings in the id and the hardships of external environment. [...] Exactly the same objections can be made against the ethical standards of the cultural super-ego. [...] It presumes [...] that a man’s ego is psychologically capable of anything that is required of it – that his ego has unlimited power over his id. This is an error.<sup>149</sup>

Cenci, having realised that society with such ideals is an untenable notion (but not

symptomless latency period’ (p. 15) and thus may be rendered incapable without warning.

<sup>149</sup> *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 68. The resemblance of Freud’s tripartite structure to the charioteer allegory in the *Phaedrus* is significant in Shelley studies (pp. 50-3, 61-6): ‘One of the horses, we say, is good and one not; [...] The horse that is harnessed on the senior side is [...] tempered by restraint and modesty. [...] The other horse is [...] hardly controllable even with whip and goad.’ (61-2) The driver of the chariot fulfils, or fails the function of super-ego: ‘[...] the ruling power in us men’ (51), which can only fully overcome the bestial desires of the bad horse/ id if it is Platonic Love. Love is thus the ideal super-ego, as opposed to ‘the ignoble qualities which the multitude extols as virtues’ (66). Plato, not unlike Shelley and ‘Monk’ Lewis, perceives a ‘society’ that is already in the hands of the anarchists.



considering the possibility of different ideals), has given free rein to both his ego and his id, embracing anarchic evil as the great truth. The First Judge pursues ‘ethical standards’ with conviction, but can only represent them through a displacement rather than an impossible extinguishing of his own ‘instinctual cravings’. Fortunately – or in a Platonic scheme, very unfortunately for him, the system he serves has promoted patriarchal sexual privileges – including rape – to such a degree that sex and torture are almost synonymous to its followers. Marzio thus suffers the unusual indignity of being ‘raped’ by a Pandemian torture-engine, sexual oppression being the established ‘charm’ to make uncooperative egos ‘meek and tame’ (I. iii. 167). I here refer to the ‘Common Aphrodite’ of the *Symposium* who is most certainly the presiding deity of Cencian Rome:

There can be no doubt of the common nature of the Love which goes with Common Aphrodite; it is quite random in the effects which it produces, and it is this love which the baser sort of men feel. [...] it is physical rather than spiritual; [...] it prefers that its objects should be as unintelligent as possible, because its only aim is the satisfaction of its desires, and it takes no account of the manner in which this is achieved.<sup>150</sup>

The Common Aphrodite and her disciples are both sensualists and pseudo-vampires, draining away the reason and virtue of their victims, and thus, their spiritual life; imposing physical oppression where necessary to their desires, and attempting to re-cast their victims’ natures in a similarly degraded, but weaker and inferior form to their own.

Seeing therefore that an ignoramus is inferior to a wise man, a coward to a hero, a poor

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<sup>150</sup> *Symposium*, p. 46.

speaker to a man of eloquence, a slow mind to a quick wit, a [Pandemian or sensualist] lover will inevitably be delighted if he finds these and a number of other mental defects part of the natural endowment of his beloved, or will do his best to foster them if they are in the process of being acquired; [...]<sup>151</sup>

Cenci's project, as regards his daughter/ 'lover', takes a more extreme form to account for the extreme defects of its instigator. Fully aware of his own corruption as seen in the light of the ethical ideals he has yet to invalidate, Cenci must reduce his 'lover' to a submissive yet 'monstrous lump of ruin' (IV. i. 95) before her inferiority to him will be conspicuous. Cenci's agenda goes further than sensual gratification, which is the usual end of Pandemian love, but his purposes serve to enhance the horror of his actions rather than alter his approach. For the immortality he envisions is an eternity of the power derived from his original Pandemian drive, and thus demands an extension of its principles to a spiritual – or more precisely an anti-spiritual – level: a conscious effort to corrupt the soul of the 'beloved' as an end in itself, rather than the incidental effect of 'mental defects' inflicted. The main distinction to be made between Cenci and the typical Pandemian lover is the latter's pursuit of 'the sweets of possession for the longest possible time',<sup>152</sup> whereas Cenci aims directly at possession and the power it denotes, for eternity. His crimes are likewise enhancements of practices that the social order takes for granted, as Orsino reveals in his inventory of patriarchal cruelties. Cenci pays penance for his sins and is genuinely pious.<sup>153</sup> Whilst Pope Clement refuses to hear the particulars of the sadistic control Cenci exercises over his family, he evidently approves the firm-handed approach in principle:

Children are disobedient, and they sting

<sup>151</sup> *Phaedrus*, p.38.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>153</sup> As Shelley is at pains to assert: 'Cenci himself built a chapel in the court of his Palace, and dedicated it to St. Thomas the Apostle, and established masses for the peace of his soul.' (Preface, *PP*, p. 241)

Their fathers' hearts to madness and despair,

Requiting years of care with contumely.

I pity the Count Cenci from my heart;

His outraged love perhaps awakened hate,

And thus he is exasperated to ill. (II. ii. 32-7)

Cenci uses his patriarchal prerogatives as father, husband, lord and 'lover' to the utmost, revealing in the process that 'the divine, indefeasible earthly sovereignty breathed into man by the Master of the universe' is essentially a *droit du seigneur* over any woman whom any other similarly privileged man has no prior claim over, though there is scope to 'vindicate that right with force or guile'<sup>154</sup> (I. i. 70). For his prerogative also extends to the general exploitation of the weaker members of society with little or no fear of reprisals: 'A man may stab his enemy, or his vassal'. Excepting his assumption that public blasphemy – an unwise attack upon his own sustaining ideology – will go unopposed indefinitely, Cenci has good reason for his confidence: 'As to my character for what men call crime/ Seeing I please my senses as I list, [...] It is a public matter [...]' (I. i. 68-71). Since the public ethic is designed to allow men such as Cenci almost unlimited scope to please their senses, his crimes are barely worthy of the name. Like a walking Dantean Hell, Cenci has come to represent the vices which society takes for granted along with 'the ignoble qualities which the multitude extol as virtues'<sup>155</sup> taken to their extreme, at which point they are exposed in their true anarchic,

<sup>154</sup> As is illustrated in the sordid affair Cenci reports in I. iii. 61-3: 'Cristofano/ Was stabbed in error by a jealous man,/ Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival'. The incident has a distinctly Gothic flavour, reminiscent of the Megalena Strozzi episode in *Zofloya* (pp. 117-24) and its direct descendant in *St Irvyne* (*ZSI*, pp. 143-54), although in these works it serves to illustrate the corrupting power of patriarchal women over men caught between a desire to be virtuous and the acceptance of predatory individualism as a necessity of life. That necessity is hardly questioned in *The Cenci*, where the stiletto is, albeit briefly, reaffirmed as a revealing symbol of accepted sexual ethics.

<sup>155</sup> *Phaedrus*, p. 66. One might cite his piety, 'strictness' to family, and parsimony. (Cf. I. i. 126-8: 'I must use/ Close husbandry, or gold, the old man's sword,/ Falls from my withered hand.') Also notable in this respect is Thrasymachus' reduction of virtues to forms: "[...] injustice, given scope, has greater strength and freedom than justice [...] justice is the interest of the stronger party, injustice the interest and profit of oneself." (*Republic*, p. 86)

inexcusable, and savage natures.<sup>156</sup>

In spite of his exhibitionism, Cenci is not entirely free from anxiety as he ventures upon the masterpiece of his career, and through such concern with concealment<sup>157</sup> proves himself a true member of this superficial civilisation:

The all beholding sun yet shines; I hear  
 A busy stir of men about the streets;  
 I see the bright sky through the window panes:  
 It is a garish, broad and peering day;  
 Loud, light, suspicious, full of eyes and ears,  
 And every little corner, nook, and hole  
 Is penetrated with the insolent light.  
 Come darkness! (II. i. 174-81)

Cenci, however, is aware that within a patriarchal system which defines women in terms of objects of value, any sexual transgression of his will incur far more disgust and danger upon Beatrice's person than his own: 'Let her then wish for night' (187). Ever the Romantic antihero, Cenci proves himself not only ready to employ twisted Platonic theories in his cause, but also the

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<sup>156</sup> See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), pp. 101-2.

[Commentary on Canto V] *The Black Wind*. As the lovers drifted into self-indulgence and were carried away by their passions, so now they drift for ever. The bright, voluptuous sin is now seen *as it is* – a howling discomfort of helpless discomfort. (The "punishment" for sin is simply the sin itself, experienced without illusion [...]).

<sup>157</sup> Which may be financially motivated. See I. i. 5-33: Cenci makes the most of Camillo's weakness by boasting of his concealed crimes (which enhances his power), but referring so vaguely that he will remain immune from prosecution and penance (which, by betraying his fear of punishment from the authorities, does quite the opposite).

views of Rousseau, as mediated by Mary Wollstonecraft:

[...] Rousseau declares, ‘that reputation is no less indispensable than chastity’. ‘A man,’ adds he, ‘secure in his own good conduct, depends only on himself, and may brave the public opinion; but a woman, in behaving well, performs but half her duty; as what is thought of her, is as important to her as what she really is. [...] Opinion is the grave of virtue among the men; but its throne among women.’<sup>158</sup>

Total self-reliance is Cenci’s goal, which he does not achieve, but dares to presume. He calls his crimes a ‘public matter’ in the belief that he is untouchable, ‘secure in his own’ hated but respected reputation and the protection of his sexual and household privileges. Beatrice has no such securities.

Such is Rousseau’s opinion as quoted by Mary Wollstonecraft, though confirmation may be sought in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.<sup>159</sup> Wollstonecraft, however, is particularly attentive to this double-standard, which she deplors ‘as the grand source of female depravity, the impossibility of regaining respectability by a return to virtue, though men preserve theirs during the indulgence of vice.’ ‘[...] he that triumphed in thy weakness is now pursuing new conquests. But for thee there is no redemption on this side the grave!’<sup>160</sup> The martial metaphor, though clichéd,<sup>161</sup> is here striking, with

<sup>158</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 203.

<sup>159</sup> *La Nouvelle Héloïse – Julie, or the New Eloise*, translated and abridged by Judith H. McDowell (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), p. 206.

A virtuous woman must not only deserve her husband’s esteem but also obtain it. If he blames her, she is to blame, and even were she innocent, she is in the wrong as soon as she is suspected, for even keeping up appearances is part of her duty.

<sup>160</sup> *Rights of Woman*, pp. 203, 196.

<sup>161</sup> See *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Fourth Edition, ed. Angela Partington (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): ‘She whom I love is hard to catch, and conquer,/ Hard, but O the glory of the winning were she won!’ (George Meredith, p. 458) ‘O saw ye bonnie Lesley,/ As she gaed o’er the border?/ She’s gone, like Alexander,/ To spread her conquests further.’ (Robert Burns, p. 161) Orsino uses a similarly aggressive metaphor to describe the ‘winning’ of Beatrice’s love: ‘I were a fool, not less than a panther/ Were panic-stricken by the antelope’s eye,/ If she escape me.’ (I. ii. 89-91)

the emphatic conjunction of sexual exploitation and death. In this context, it is a disturbing reflection that a culture should even coin such a term as ‘sexual conquest’, which is grimly verified by Wollstonecraft’s examples.<sup>162</sup> Count Cenci and the First Judge make literal use of this metaphor, the former defining sexuality as a weapon and the latter defining a weapon as a sexual being. From these viewpoints, the term ‘conquest’ takes priority over ‘sexual desire’. A linguistic convention, taken literally, supports such extreme perversions in the interests of a patriarchal ideology. Wollstonecraft identifies similar ideological jargon in Richardson’s *Clarissa*, to more insidious effect:

When Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that he had robbed her of her honour, he must have had strange notions of honour and virtue. For miserable beyond all names of misery is the condition of a being, who could be degraded without its own consent!<sup>163</sup>

For ‘no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another’<sup>164</sup> asserts Shelley, though somewhat ironically reiterating this martial concept of ‘honour’ which supports the dominating, egotistic purposes of patriarchal and Pandemian sexuality. The rapist is cast in the light of a successful duellist, leaving his ‘defeated’ victim to incur the degradation regardless of her non-consent. Cenci, however, is alert to the superficial nature of such degradation, and requires that Beatrice appear ‘to her own conscious self/ All she appears to others’ (IV. i. 87-8), which he believes will require her complete conversion to incestuous masochism. In this, he underestimates

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<sup>162</sup> *Rights of Woman*, pp. 125-6:

I only exclaim against the sexual desire of conquest when the heart is out of the question. [...] ‘I have endeavoured’ says Lord Chesterfield, ‘to gain the hearts of twenty women, whose persons I would not have given a fig for.’ The libertine who, in a gust of passion, takes advantage of unsuspecting tenderness, is a saint when compared with this cold-hearted rascal [...]

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>164</sup> Preface, *PP*, p. 240.

the power of the prevailing conventions to drive his daughter to despair even on the grounds of an unwilling violation:

[...] What have I done?

Am I not innocent? Is it my crime

That one with white hair, and imperious brow,

Who tortured me from my forgotten years,

As parents only dare, should call himself

My father, [...]. (III. i. 69-74)

Thus Beatrice asks, and not with groundless anxiety when we take Wollstonecraft into account along with a remarkably ironic reviewer's comment in the *London Magazine* for April 1820: 'We envy not the feelings of any one who can read the curses that Cenci invokes on his daughter, when she refuses to repeat *her guilt*, without the strongest disgust'<sup>165</sup> (my italics), which mis-attributes blame, the Preface notwithstanding, very casually. Again, the institution of language provides total sexual immunity for even a man of Cenci's excesses, allowing him to displace his entire guilt upon his sexual victim. In the case of Count Cenci – self-contemptuous yet recognising no power to which he need submit (God is to be respected, but only on equal terms) – his entire guilt, personal sense of corruption and need for punishment are forced upon his external ego: Beatrice, 'particle of [his] divided being', who he prays may suffer all the physical consequences of his vice but for quite the opposite intentions of Dorian Gray. Cenci envisions his self-created double as a surrogate to suffer both the earthly and spiritual consequences of his own sins, and finds considerable support for his hypothesis in a society that insists upon the 'guilt' of the 'dishonoured'

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<sup>165</sup> *The Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 610.

woman.

Taking Plato as the advocate of enlightened spirituality, Cenci's own theories are downright perverse, yet it is an irony of *The Cenci* that the debauched egotist has a significantly more spiritual outlook than his (initially) virtuous daughter. In spite of his obsession with bodily corruption in Act IV, his real target remains Beatrice's soul. Her body is easily claimed, the female body being a possession that the ageing sensualist has learned to take for granted, but now serves him only as a means to an end: 'I rarely kill the body, which preserves,/ Like a strong prison, the soul within my power,' (I. i. 114-5) which indicates that Cenci and Plato are at least in agreement that the body is a prison where corruption of the soul can occur, should the soul be forced into 'loathsome sympathy'<sup>166</sup> with the corrupted body.<sup>167</sup>

Cenci attempts to escape from his own prison in no uncertain terms, displacing it upon his daughter. His success is considerable, owing much to the physicality which pervades the spiritual philosophy of the establishment: the Catholic church, which aside from its evident materialistic corruption and sexual hypocrisy also attaches great spiritual significance to the body that Plato dismisses as a distraction, albeit a deadly one. In the 'sad reality'<sup>168</sup> of her social and religious context, Beatrice is incapable of making such a clear separation between body and soul. The separation she does make is not an optimistic one: after her violation, she declares 'These putrefying limbs/ Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul' (III. i. 26-7), which echoes Socrates' statement in the *Phaedrus*, that the body is a 'walking sepulchre' of 'pollution' (p. 57). Plato

<sup>166</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, I, 451.

<sup>167</sup> *Phaedo*, p. 133-4.

[...] if at the time of release the soul is tainted and impure, because it has always associated with the body and cared for it and loved it, and has been so beguiled by the body and its passions and pleasures that nothing seems real to it but those physical things which can be touched and seen and eaten and drunk and used for sexual enjoyment; [...] They continue wandering until, at last, through craving for the corporeal, which unceasingly pursues them, they are imprisoned once more in a body.

Physical pleasure and pain are explicitly of the same nature in the *Republic*: 'You must, in fact, have noticed many similar cases in which the pain we suffer makes us glorify freedom and rest from pain as the highest pleasure, rather than any positive enjoyment.' (*Republic*, p. 408) In the sadomasochistic society of *The Cenci*, pleasure and pain are equally corrupting forces.

<sup>168</sup> Dedication to Leigh Hunt, Esq. *PP*, p. 237.



evidently only intends to signal the danger and not the inevitability of spiritual death with the term ‘sepulchre’, which Shelley takes up in ‘On Love’ for a more specific caution: ‘So soon as this want or power [of ego-transcending love] is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.’<sup>169</sup> In a state of uncommunicative, egotistic trauma, from which she never fully recovers, Beatrice’s quick conviction, ‘I am dead!’ (III. i. 26), has an unfortunate ring of Shelleyan truth.

Beatrice, however, has a different understanding, or misunderstanding, of the reason for her ‘pollution’, twice failing to designate her body as a ‘prison’. First it is a ‘sepulchre’, and therefore permanent and inescapable. She then identifies it as ‘the unworthy temple of [God’s] spirit’ become ‘a foul den from which what Thou abhorrest/ May mock thee, unavenged’ (III. i. 129-31), invoking the Pauline fixation on physical purity<sup>170</sup> and supporting Cenci’s intentions even beyond his hopes. For unlike her father, who has some faith in the superior strength of spirit over matter, Beatrice has no doubt that ‘The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!’ (23) is as vulnerable a part of her being as her sinews and flesh, as far as the ‘clinging, black, contaminating mist’ (17) of Cenci’s corrosive spirit is concerned. Within the ‘temple’ of her body, Beatrice imagines a disgusted Holy Spirit vying for dominance with the spirit of Cenci, who is ‘a spirit of deep hell’ (IV. ii. 7). Nor is Cenci himself at all averse to this identification: ‘I do not feel as if I were a man,/ But like a fiend appointed to chastise/ The offences of some unremembered world’ (IV.i, 160-2). Whether this refers to the Biblical or Platonic Fall,<sup>171</sup> it confirms Cenci in his self-image as a Miltonic Satan, crusading to prevent humanity recovering spiritual grace in order that they will not transcend his power in the

<sup>169</sup> *PP*, p. 474.

<sup>170</sup> See I Corinthians 6. 16-20.

You surely know that anyone who joins himself to a prostitute becomes physically one with her, for scripture says, ‘the two shall become one flesh’; but anyone who joins himself to the Lord is one with him spiritually. Have nothing to do with fornication. Every other sin that one may commit is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God’s gift to you? You do not belong to yourselves; you were bought at a price. Then honour God in your body.

*The Oxford Study Bible*, eds. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, James R. Mueller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 1452.

<sup>171</sup> See *Phaedrus*, 50-7.

hereafter. The exact terminology, however, has less grandiose connotations: Cenci might care to believe that God sanctions his power-struggle, but it transpires that he is the ‘appointed’ servant of a more earthly system.

In order to reinforce this identification with immortal evil, simultaneously provoking fear, disgust, and self-contempt in his audience, Cenci indulges in the sacramental perversion of I. iii, staging a ‘black mass’<sup>172</sup> in which he allies in no uncertain terms with the cause of Satan: ‘Who, if a father’s curses, as men say,/ Climb with swift wings after their children’s souls,/ And drag them from the very throne of Heaven,/ Now triumphs in my triumph!’ (84-7) Once again, it is Cenci’s expressed attitude that is contrary to established ethics: for the patriarchal Catholic institution claims a similar final control over the destinations of souls, and whilst Cenci scorns its ability to absolve his soul through simony, it is the corrupt or weak individual clerics that he derides rather than the institution. He has no intention of dying without his last rites, and every intention of denying Beatrice hers: ‘[...] she shall die unshrived and unforgiven,/ A rebel to her father and her God’ (IV. i. 89-90). Established religion thus provides a very simple method for the corrupt patriarch to impose at least purgatorial divine punishment upon the virtuous but vulnerable.

Purgatory, however, is by no means sufficient to sate his megalomania. In the banquet scene, Cenci sets himself up as a Satanic priest,<sup>173</sup> and seizes control of the Eucharist as a weapon targeted against his children, at once subjugating them and empowering him. Transubstantiation is distorted to serve his vampiric fantasy, as he desires of his wine: ‘Be thou the resolution of quick youth/ Within my veins, and manhood’s purpose stern,/ And age’s firm, cold, subtle villainy;/ As if thou wert indeed my children’s blood/ Which I did thirst to drink!’ (III. i. 173-7) Cenci proposes to reclaim the particles of his ‘divided being’, whom he perceives as a diminishment of his powers or

<sup>172</sup> Discussed in ‘Cenci as Corrupt Dramatic Poet’, p. 111:

Expecting a climactic conflict, but receiving disbelief from Beatrice and the Guests [...] Cenci finally resorts to a perversion of religious ritual in the celebration of a Satanic Mass and the drinking of the “sacramental” blood of his sons.

<sup>173</sup> As Crook and Gupton point out, he is more of a ‘vicar to Jupiter’ (*Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 201): otherwise put, a self-contemptuous self-worshipper who would attempt to drag everyone into the spiritual void in his wake.

a taunting reminder of their diminishment, but is aware that this is a fantasy as regards his dead sons ('*As if thou wert*'). The perverted Eucharist he inflicts upon Beatrice, on the other hand, proves an effective gesture of power. 'O blood, which art my father's blood,/ Circling through these contaminated veins,' (III. i. 95-6) suggests the transubstantiation of her father's semen<sup>174</sup> into his (spiritually and physically) diseased blood, which incites Beatrice to briefly consider a twisted Eucharist of her own: 'If thou, poured forth on the polluted earth,/ Could wash away the crime, and punishment/ By which I suffer ... no, that cannot be!' (97-9) Instead of the sinful soul receiving grace through the blood of the saviour, it might be possible to purge it of contamination, were the act itself not a mortal sin. Her obedience to this doctrine notwithstanding, Beatrice retains her material notion of spiritual contamination, and thus proceeds to clean out her Platonic prison rather than setting her sights beyond it.<sup>175</sup>

Cenci's demonic self-styling proves a highly effective strategy, leading to the increasing attribution throughout the play of power and presence to evil, as opposed to the negation and denial of autonomous evil in *Prometheus Unbound*. Beatrice, perceiving nothing to indicate that there is a positive force for good in the physical world she is conditioned to value,<sup>176</sup> ascribes as much, if not more power to 'the mighty Devil in Hell' (I. iii. 83) as her father does. Whilst her assertion of Cenci's literally fiendish status is to an extent 'a fiction she has conjured to insulate her from guilt and to justify her actions'<sup>177</sup> it is undoubtedly a very unwilling one, as she labours under a sense of external contamination from the worst possible source for such a devout Catholic: sexual

<sup>174</sup> See *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p. 116.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. *Rights of Woman*, p. 113. 'Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison.' Wollstonecraft confirms a number of points strongly suggested in the transgressive Gothic and *The Cenci*: first, that the body is a prison. Second, that 'civilised' sexual codes are inextricably linked with domination ('sceptre'). Third, that the patriarchal ideology enforces the notion of women's essential duty being to present a 'valuable' (beautiful *and* virginal) body to either a husband or Christ, (as the *Measure For Measure* inspired fate of Agnes grimly illustrates in *The Monk*). Finally, that this insistence upon bodily preservation is spiritually narrowing.

<sup>176</sup> 'I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights/ And lifted up to God, the Father of all,/ Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard/ I still have borne' (III. i. 117-20). Considering that the spiritual tradition to which she is bound consists of obeisance to an unresponsive patriarchal figure, it is hardly surprising that she should later consider 'If all things then should be ... my father's spirit'.

<sup>177</sup> *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, p. 123.

intercourse with incubi<sup>178</sup> was a published and accepted activity and initiation rite of witches for Renaissance church authorities, as established in the *Malleus maleficarum*:

[...] (c. 1486; Eng. Trans., 1928) regarded as the standard handbook on witchcraft, including its detection and its extirpation, until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. [...] In Part I the reality and the depravity of witches is emphasized, and any disbelief in demonology is condemned as heresy. Because of the nature of the enemy, any witness, no matter what his credentials, may testify against an accused. Part II is a compendium of fabulous stories about the activities of witches – e.g., diabolic compacts, sexual relations with devils (incubi and succubi), transvection (night-riding), and metamorphosis. Part III is a discussion of the legal procedures to be followed in witch trials. Torture is sanctioned as a means of securing confessions. Lay and secular authorities are called upon to assist the inquisitors in the task of exterminating those whom Satan has enlisted in his cause.<sup>179</sup>

Beatrice, at all events, is accused of parricide rather than witchcraft, but the parallel is a

<sup>178</sup> Beatrice's occasional resemblance to Lady Macbeth – her delirious obsession with blood and spiritual purgation at III. i. 95-9, and her chiding the assassins' cowardice at IV .ii. 39-43 and IV. iii. 22-33 – may call to our minds the spirit-summoning of *Macbeth*, I. v. 45-53: a symbolic ravishment to render Lady Macbeth 'polluted' with patriarchal vice:

[...] Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
[...] Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, [...]

The conjunction between sexuality, demonology, and patriarchy is significant in both plays. Kilgour writes of the succubus Matilda in *The Monk* 'The distinction between the sexes [...] is reaffirmed by the discovery that the woman who has autonomy, reason, and authority is in reality a demon.' Taking a wider critical stance than Lewis, Shelley reaches a similar conclusion: that any adherent of the essential patriarchal qualities – cruelty, egotism, remorselessness &c. – is a 'demon' regardless of gender. The greater blame is reserved for men, who prove more adept in spreading their contamination.

<sup>179</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, Micropædia, vol. VI (Chicago and London: William Benton, 1974), pp. 538-9.

disturbing one. Whether one chooses to view this document in a sceptical light – as a cynical means of enforcing a religious power-base through terror, superstition and corrupt judicial practice – or as a genuinely misguided attempt to defend an ideology that had become entrenched beyond question as a ‘greater good’, the relevance to her situation is clear. No-one actually accuses Beatrice of having allied with the cause of Satan, but she explicitly enters into a cause directly opposed to the conception of God shared by Cenci, and the establishment’s figurehead: Pope Clement, who ‘[...] holds it of most dangerous example/ In aught to weaken the paternal power,/ Being, as ‘twere, the shadow of his own.’ (II.ii, 54-6) Thus, Beatrice’s strike at paternal power renders her ‘A rebel to her father and her God,’ since Beatrice’s God is the ‘Father of all’ worshipped by Cenci and the establishment he grotesquely epitomises. Aware of this, she denies Cenci’s fatherhood<sup>180</sup> and reconstructs him as a devil in human form, and herself as the ‘exterminating’ witch-hunter. ‘Beatrice tries to rectify the political and moral corruption of her situation by adopting patriarchal (masculine) methods’<sup>181</sup> only to discover that such unauthorised appropriation of the patriarchal establishment’s prerogatives is no more acceptable to it than open revolt. Beatrice seizes the initiative in the struggle for her own salvation, and this is no defence before a religious institution which insists upon its exclusive control of the soul’s fate through rites and sacraments. Attempted spiritual autonomy is anathema to Pope Clement’s regime, as Cenci almost lives to discover.

Whilst the Catholic dimensions of this do not apply readily to Regency society, Shelley could easily look to Wollstonecraft for a closely-related monopoly. ‘[...] it is a farce’, she affirms, ‘to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason.’ But reason is considered to be the domain of men, whom women should look to as spiritual guardians and ‘take things on trust.’ In this role, men fail dismally, instead labouring to inure women to a life of ignorance and sensual slavery: ‘[...] I will venture to assert, that all the causes of female weakness, as well as depravity, [...] branch out of one grand cause – want of chastity in men.’<sup>182</sup>

<sup>180</sup> See IV. iv. 112-3: ‘I am more innocent of parricide/ Than is a child born fatherless [...]’.

<sup>181</sup> *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, p. 104.

<sup>182</sup> *Rights of Woman*, pp. 90, 208.

The Catholic institution of *The Cenci* is similarly self-serving, devoted to the acquisition of profit and sustaining its temporal power, demanding obedience and offering nothing in return save the lowest of pleasures: ‘a cessation of pain’. Having placed her faith in this establishment, Beatrice is effectively violated and abandoned by it, to find there is ‘no redemption on this side the grave’ and possibly none the other side, or at least none that it can provide.

Both Beatrice and Count Cenci recognise the danger of relying upon such obviously corrupt and worldly intercessors for their immortality, and strive to develop a one-to-one relationship with God. Self-defence becomes the key principle of their spirituality, as they endeavour to eradicate any threats to their identification with their perceived divine ideal: for Cenci, absolute power, and for Beatrice, absolute purity. Truly her father’s daughter, Beatrice reflects his *modus operandi* in taking to a ruthless extreme a principle which society essentially enshrines: since the established measure of virtue in a woman is her sexual ‘purity’, it is her principle duty to preserve it, or at least to conceal its violation. Wollstonecraft condemns the wider moral value of this ‘principle duty’ of ‘honourable’ women:

If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, be safe, she may neglect every social duty; nay, ruin her family by gaming and extravagance; yet still present a shameless front – for truly she is an honourable woman!<sup>183</sup>

With the issue of her chastity at stake, Beatrice is able to reconcile herself to graver offences than Wollstonecraft catalogues. Public prosecution is out of the question, in the certainty that it would render her ‘unpolluted fame [...] a stale mouthèd story;/ A mock, a byword, an astonishment’ (III. i. 158-60). Virtue, chastity, and reputation are so confounded that surreptitious Machiavellian schemes seem the lesser of two evils. Indeed, in context murder seems to her ‘a high and holy deed’

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

(IV. ii. 35) as she relentlessly pursues the only female ‘virtue’ her society values. Reconciliation of worldly reputation with spiritual grace seems unlikely, yet Beatrice declares that Cenci ‘Stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul;/ And my untainted fame’ (V. ii. 123-4).

Cenci himself believes that the attainment of both projects will require more than one blow. His concern for worldly repute is nevertheless similar, demonstrated in his attempts to assume an invulnerable front before his fellow authoritarians. Curran notes his feigned unconcern before Camillo in Act I, as he receives notice of the Papal acquisition of his lands: ‘Cenci tosses away a fortune as another man would a pittance; “The third of my possessions – let it go!” (I. i. 15). Some hundred lines later, when Camillo withdraws, Cenci reveals his thoughts in a greatly altered tone’.<sup>184</sup> Cenci is certainly not regardless of this penalty, but cannot admit to any weakness if he is to achieve his perverted ideal, which depends upon his power being conspicuous against the weakness of his fellow beings. Beatrice’s ideal of purity – of patriarchal social origin – must likewise be socially validated. Both their egotistic schemes are based upon becoming, or remaining, exemplars within their ‘proper’ worldly sphere, both assuming that divine nature takes after these patriarchal ideals. Cenci’s God is the ultimate advocate of paternal, aristocratic and masculine authority, whilst Beatrice’s is the ultimate male gaze, repelled at any sign of female sexual ‘impurity’, consensual or otherwise. Their religion confirms them in such worldly spiritual paths, as do the political and domestic conventions of their society. None of these apparent schemes for order offer anything to counteract the self-preservation that motivates all action within *The Cenci*, yet this contradictory social ‘order’ perseveres against itself, against dramatic precedents but very much in keeping with the incurably corrupt world of the ‘male’ Gothic:

It is true that no Jacobean tragedy is an uninterrupted descent into the pit; all of the great plays end with some restoration of order or decency. We feel, particularly in

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<sup>184</sup> *Scorpions Ringed With Fire*, p. 73.

Shakespeare, a vast sense of relief at the purgation of evil that has poisoned the well-being of the characters and destroyed so much greatness and beauty. All Jacobean tragedy suggests, moreover, that evil contains the seeds of its own destruction, that because it naturally overreaches it is sterile and self-defeating.<sup>185</sup>

Perhaps Shelley's most clear departure from Jacobean models is his final assessment: society in *The Cenci* has not been corrupted, but is fundamentally corrupt, and has never been seriously threatened with dissolution. Cenci and Beatrice both attempt the role of the rebellious tragic hero, and are negated before they can inflict any significant impact on the prevailing systems. Society easily contains these efforts at autonomy that are governed by its own principles: for both would-be rebels strive to fulfil a paradigm that the establishment essentially approves, but threaten to expose the true, predatory nature of that establishment through their fanatical efforts. Whilst neither 'restoration of order or decency' nor 'purgation of evil' are thus possible, if social stability were desirable in Cencian Rome, the resolution would stand as a triumph and not a tragedy.

It is unlikely that Shelley would have deemed over-reaching *per se* to be an evil act, though Cenci and Beatrice both aim for the highest honours. This distinguishes them from such 'anarchs' as Othman, Rosalind's husband – 'a man/ Hard, selfish, loving only gold' ('Rosalind and Helen', 248-9), and Matilda, whose ambitions are strictly limited to worldly pleasures, albeit in excess. It is the egotistic ideology that Cenci and Beatrice have accepted which prevents them from making any spiritual progress, their ambitions notwithstanding. The 'descent into the pit' is occasioned by turning to the impossibly demanding patriarchal super-ego as the ultimate authority, then attempting to emulate that authority, since the whole system is founded on the basis of power-competition.

Whilst this certainly proves self-defeating for the individual, the system endures. For '[...] life is poisoned in its wells', its effects going far beyond 'the well-being of the characters'.

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<sup>185</sup> Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 274.



Masculine sexuality having been identified as the source of the corruption, the impossibility of eradicating it except by a major ideological revolution becomes apparent. ‘Beatrice attempts change only at the surface level of human activity. She attacks the symptom (Cenci) but not the illness’,<sup>186</sup> by which time she herself has become a ‘symptom’ of the same malaise. As the dominating, dagger-wielding patriarchal woman of IV. iii – following in the wake of Olivia Zastrozzi – she returns her sexual violation with an act that distils it to its metaphysical essence. In spite of the ruthlessness of the patriarchal super-ego, power and aggression cannot be totally monopolised by one gender, but the attempted suppression works to convince women of their usefulness (or in Beatrice’s case, their apparent necessity).<sup>187</sup> Not for nothing does Shelley give both Cenci and Beatrice the imagery of syphilitic symptoms in describing the metaphysical consequences of the rape: disease or no disease, this egotistic lust is a ‘poisoning’ of the sexual instinct, yet a most effective one that allows the scorpion to sting itself to death but not without having stung others, who repeat the pattern.

Thus, the devotees of the Pandemian Aphrodite can produce ‘spiritual children’ with ease: they themselves fit that category, as the distinctly paternal establishment of *The Cenci* is at pains to emphasise. Even though corrupted, the generative instinct retains its basic function, and Cenci intends to leave at least one survivor to perpetuate his evil philosophy (which is to say, he believes himself to be the originator): ideally the child-antitype he wishes Beatrice to conceive, but, failing that, a despairing and corrupted Bernardo. The only immortality he thus achieves is the continued survival of the system, of which he was never more than a ‘symptom’. Ultimately, there is no ‘perfect revelation’ for the Pandemian lover, who cannot begin to approach an understanding of divine nature whilst that is strategically defined by worldly, patriarchal authorities to consolidate their position, and upon which authorities she or he has been conditioned to depend, or to emulate.

Declaring ‘The air/ Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe/ In charnel pits!’ (III. i.

<sup>186</sup> *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, p. 104.

<sup>187</sup> As Wollstonecraft anticipates, though not to the Gothic excesses of Beatrice Cenci: ‘[...] should [women] be ambitious, they must govern their tyrants by sinister tricks, for without rights there cannot be any incumbent duties’ (*Rights of Woman*, p. 215).

14-6) Beatrice briefly realises the extent and implications of this all-encompassing, institutionalised ‘sin embracing death’. Like the world as described by Wollstonecraft, the society of *The Cenci* has more or less given up on immortal aspirations, religious or philosophical, in favour of ‘the cold, or feverish caresses of appetite’ or whatever else may denote them. Such individuals who still retain ‘intimations of immortality’ are greatly hindered in pursuing them by the prevalence of this system. This applies doubly for women, whom the system attempts to construct as completely unspiritual entities whose only ‘value’ is practically economic, based upon physical ‘virtues’. Beatrice thus supposes that a patriarchal God will either require her actual chastity or at the very least an unsullied reputation before considering her ‘pure’ enough for salvation. Insofar as this general acceptance of mortality dominates all human activity in *The Cenci*, the ‘dead’ do indeed ‘breathe’. Shelley now dispenses altogether with phantom nuns, animated skeletons, shrieking spectres and Faustian demons: the characters he depicts resemble the drifting, materialistic damned spirits of the *Phaedo* too closely to require any supernatural counterparts.

The persistence of sepulchral imagery in this late work, coupled with the absence of the actual supernatural, represents a continuation of the Gothic psychodrama form first attempted in *Zastrozzi*. Whereas the previous work had, however, located all the perverse, ‘living-dead’ psyches within a distinctly limited domestic circle, *The Cenci* moves outward from the sphere of the corrupt family into much larger social, political, and religious dimensions, only to find that the corruption is all-pervading, and has reduced even the ostensible guardians of ethics and virtue (such as the inquisitors and Pope Clement) into spiritually-dead entities. Rather than use spectres and vampires as grotesque allegories of human corruption, Shelley simply (and more horrifyingly) allows his human characters to attain levels of despair and degeneracy better suited to the undead. One might well describe the manner of life chosen by Cenci and Beatrice as ‘Life in Death’, to cite a notable Romantic vampire-figure, and it is to Shelley’s use of such a figure that I now turn, in the fragment ‘Invocation to Misery’.



## III

**Vampires among men**

In chapter one I alluded to the necrophiliac fantasies of the mainly male (and always patriarchal) lovers in *Zofloya* and *Zastrozzi*, referring this theme to Shelley's *Phaedo*-inspired letter of June 2 1811 (to Hogg), which is worthy of reiteration:

[...] does it not border on wilful deception, deliberate, intentional self-deceit, to continue to love the body when the soul is no more? As well might you court the worms which the soulless body of a beloved being generates – be lost to yourself, and to those who admire you for what is really amiable in you; in the damp, unintelligent vaults of a charnel-house.

His early convictions notwithstanding, Shelley found cause to apply the same morbid paradigm to his own love affairs in 1814, when his first wife Harriet tragically declined in his intellectual estimation. His possibly unintentional denigration of her to Peacock as a 'noble animal'<sup>188</sup> – which is ungenerous enough from a poet apt to impose bestial metaphors on such spiritually-dead 'anarchs' as Othman<sup>189</sup> – proves a mild reflection of the opinion he expressed to Hogg:

You will rejoice that after struggles & privations which almost withered me to

<sup>188</sup> 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley', in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, vol. 8, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith & C. E. Jones (London & New York: Constable & Co. Ltd, Gabriel Wells, 1934), pp. 39-141: '[Quoting Shelley] "Every one who knows me must know that the partner of my life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet is a noble animal, but she can do neither."' (p. 92).

<sup>189</sup> This dehumanising analogy for tyrants and slaves is encountered in Shelley's work before and after this period. In 1812, *Queen Mab* depicts human society as insect-like: 'an ant-hill's citizens' (II. 101) governed by 'Those gilded flies/ That, basking in the sunshine of a court,/ Fatten on its corruption!' (III. 106-8) *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (of 1819-20) represents Regency society as a swinish multitude and the Prince Regent, and courtiers and politicians as a varied selection of 'filthy and ugly animals' (Act II.ii, 102-3 *stage direction*).

idiotism, I enjoy an happiness the most perfect & exalted that it is possible for my nature to participate. [...] I suddenly perceived that the entire devotion with which I had resigned all prospects of utility or happiness to the single purpose of cultivating Harriet was a gross & despicable superstition. [...] I saw the full extent of the calamity which my rash & heartless union with Harriet: an union over whose entrance might justly be in[s]cribed

Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrante!

[‘LAY DOWN ALL HOPE, YOU THAT GO IN BY ME.’<sup>190</sup>]

had produced. I felt as if a dead & living body had been linked together in loathsome & horrible communion.<sup>191</sup>

The concept of vampirism is not explicitly stated, but clearly implied through Gothic imagery and the ‘parasitic’ role the poet assigns to Harriet Shelley, casting himself as a tragically-deluded victim almost ‘withered’ and permanently degraded through sexual ‘communion’ with this less-than-human entity. One might suspect the lingering influence of Lewis in this bizarre construction, with Shelley adopting the victimised poise of Don Raymond and unkindly imposing that of the bleeding nun on his rejected wife. Harriet Shelley’s comments on the same event provide an ironic, inadvertent retaliation: ‘Mr Shelley has become profligate & sensual [...] the man I once loved is dead, this is a vampire, his character is blasted for ever.’<sup>192</sup> The Shelleys both imply a form of sadism, but each takes a distinct emphasis concerning the characteristics of the vampire. Harriet Shelley focuses upon the well-established nature of the creature itself – its cruelty, its inherent sensuality and its corrupted ties to former loved ones and relations – for which she could also look to Lewis and other sources such as Bürger’s *Lenore*,<sup>193</sup> Byron’s *The Giaour*, Coleridge’s *The Rime of*

<sup>190</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell*, Canto III, 9, p. 85.

<sup>191</sup> 4 October 1814, to Thomas Jefferson Hogg in *Letters I*, pp. 401-3.

<sup>192</sup> Louise Schutz Boas, *Harriet Shelley: Five Long Years* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 168.

<sup>193</sup> Whilst the revenant of *Lenore* is actually Death in person, the implications and influences on later depictions of explicit vampirism are clear insofar as Bürger’s character is ‘personified death in the guise of a young woman or young man who had come back from the beyond and whose amorous embraces proved fatal.’ Cf. Jean Marigny,

*the Ancient Mariner*, and Southey's *Thalaba*.

Notwithstanding that of all of the vampires presented in these works, only the creature of *The Giaour* is an unequivocal blood-drinker, the parasitic function of the creature is widely agreed upon, and this proves to be Shelley's dominant interest. The sado-masochistic necrophilia he aptly depicts as a 'loathsome and horrible communion' suggests the traditional danger that is not explicitly referred to in these earlier Romantic vampire episodes,<sup>194</sup> nor by Harriet Shelley: the complete corruption of the vampire's victim into a second vampire. As Shelley himself would later describe its *modus operandi*, 'Infecting all with his own hideous ill' (*Prometheus Unbound*, III. iv, 148), at which one is distinctly reminded of Count Cenci's virulent potency. That this 'vampire among men' (147) is principally defined as 'a soul self-consumed' (146) inwardly suppressing 'love and hope' (145) strengthens the identification. Furthermore, in spite of a fairly general Romantic indifference on the subject of vampiric blood-drinking, Cenci's symbolic indulgence in this perversion, not to mention his motivation of self-restoration, provides good reason to suspect a deliberate 'Gothicism' on Shelley's part. Cenci's resemblance to the vampire depicted in *The Giaour* is also noteworthy:

There from thy daughter, sister, wife,  
 At midnight drain the stream of life;  
 Yet loathe the banquet which perforce  
 Must feed thy livid living corse:  
 Thy victims ere they yet expire  
 Shall know the demon for their sire,

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*Vampires: The World of the Undead*, trans. Lory Frankel (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1994), p. 69. Marigny describes Burger as one of 'the great German models of the preceding generation' of Romantic authors, whose influence is felt in the Gothic works of later authors, including Coleridge and Keats (p. 70). Marigny does not list Shelley among Romantic vampire-authors.

Also, see Karl S Guthke, *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 129, on *Lenore*: 'Along with its gothic horror, the poem also revives the erotic aspect of the encounter with Death, which is one of the theme's hallmarks throughout the Romantic Age [...]'.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>194</sup> The endnotes of *Thalaba the Destroyer*, Book VIII, however, contain extensive accounts of eastern European vampire reports and state '[...] the established opinion is, that a person sucked by a Vampire becomes a Vampire himself, and sucks in his turn'. This and subsequent references to *Thalaba* are taken from *Robert Southey: Poetical Works*, vol. III, eds. Tim Fulford, David E. White and Carol Bolton (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004) (p. 265).

As cursing thee, thou cursing them,  
 Thy flowers are wither'd on the stem.  
 But one that for thy crime must fall,  
 The youngest, most beloved of all,  
 Shall bless thee with a *father's* name—  
 That word shall wrap thy heart in flame!  
 Yet thou must end thy task, and mark  
 Her cheek's last tinge, her eye's last spark,  
 And the last glassy glance must view  
 Which freezes o'er its lifeless blue;  
 Then with unhallow'd hand shalt tear  
 The tresses of her yellow hair [...] (759-76)<sup>195</sup>

Even in detail, Cenci conforms to this sadistic portrait: '[...] that wretched Beatrice/ [...] whom her father sometimes hales/ From hall to hall by the entangled hair' (III. i. 43-5). As a self-loathing yet inexorably driven entity whose principal acts of sadism are directed to 'drain the stream of life' from his children, Count Cenci clearly embodies the vague but repellent 'vampire among men' of *Prometheus Unbound*. His obsession with duplicating himself in a subservient but equally corrupt form – preferably in the person of Beatrice – more closely reflects the vampire of post-*Dracula* fiction. Shelley, nevertheless, evidently recognised the potential analogy between vampires and living 'anarchs': the will to dominate, to live as unproductive predators and parasites,<sup>196</sup> to spread their own corruption, and underlying all, their sexual sadism. Jean Marigny posits this supernatural conjunction between sexuality and death as the crux of Romantic interest in vampires

<sup>195</sup> References to *The Giaour* taken from *Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>196</sup> There is a most explicit, albeit entirely non-sexual analogy in *Song to the Men of England* (1819), 5-8: 'Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,/ From the cradle to the grave,/ Those ungrateful drones who would/ Drain your sweat – nay, drink your blood?'

and related beings:

[...] vampirism becomes a metaphor for the deadly passion so dear to the Romantics [...] the seductive vampires of Romantic poetry, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816), John Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1818) and *Lamia* (1820), were above all representations of the *femme fatale*. It mattered little to their creators whether or not they sucked the blood of their victims. Their essential 'advantage' was that they brought death and pleasure at the same time, and their 'victims' were consenting adults. They brought a new strain of sado-masochism into the relationship between vampire and victim [...]<sup>197</sup>

One might contest certain of these points at least insofar as *Lamia* is concerned (where death arrives with far less peace and ceremony than this would suggest). The pattern does not appear to apply to Shelley very well at all: not only because of the fact that the only explicitly-named vampire within his works is the male 'wretch' of *Prometheus Unbound*, but also for the lack of any truly 'seductive' vampire-figure within his works which is not ultimately identified with repulsive attributes. Whilst Shelley engages in these themes of sado-masochism and the eroticism of death, he works to eradicate any and all impressions that wilful self-destruction is a valid pursuit for the philosophical mind. From as early as *Zastrozzi*, the figure of the *femme fatale* is a true devotee of the Pandemian Aphrodite, and embodies dangers far greater than her attractions for the Shelleyan protagonist. The anodyne offered by such a figure, as opposed to the 'easeful death'<sup>198</sup> masochistically invoked by Keats, proves a 'monotony of ecstasy' (*Zastrozzi*, p. 87-8) or less: a mere

<sup>197</sup> *Vampires*, p. 70. Karl Guthke, however, offers a contradictory assessment in *Gender of Death*: '[...] the Romantic Age paid comparatively little attention to the personification of death as a woman' (p. 155). Marigny's account, to which I am more inclined, names (and brings to mind other) characters that cast doubt upon this opinion.

<sup>198</sup> John Keats. 'Ode to a Nightingale,' l. 52.



cessation of physical pain while the threat of it remains, which is also as much as Count Cenci – the male pseudo-vampire – is prepared to offer his victims.

The conjunction of ‘death and pleasure’ in Shelley’s works – with the exception of Laon’s and Cythna’s utopian passing on – is a doubtful matter that occasions little optimism from the poet’s narrators. Notwithstanding the victimised stance he constructs for himself in the letter of 4 October 1814, Shelley populates his works with considerably more sadists than masochists, whilst *The Cenci* states the difficulty – perhaps insuperable – for the tyrant in creating a truly ‘willing’ victim. In the vein of Dacre, ‘exultation’ in death becomes the dubious privilege of murderer rather than victim, and that affords only the most transitory pleasure. In Lewis, it affords none, and there is reason for including Ambrosio amongst the list of Romantic vampires and pseudo-vampires: not least his sexual union with ‘a manifest Fiend’ (in Southey’s words)<sup>199</sup> preceded by her (supposedly medicinal) drawing of his blood (*The Monk* p. 79). At the climax of his career, Ambrosio inclines distinctly to necrophilia as he engineers the ‘laying out’ of his victim-lover and sister Antonia<sup>200</sup> ‘[b]y the side of three putrid half-corrupted bodies’ (324) in the catacombs of St. Clare. Having cultivated his lust to a pitch, Ambrosio enacts the circumstances of Shelley’s early caution to Hogg and is most assuredly ‘lost to himself’. Interpreting his ‘fierce and unbridled desires’ as the nature of love (Matilda having voiced the same opinion, that ‘wildest passions’ amount to ‘unutterable love’: p. 80), his declaration that ‘[t]his sepulchre seems to me Love’s bower’ (327) is unremarkable given the typical standards of male Gothic lovers. Those of *Zofloya* and *Zastrozzi* imagine the graves of their fiancés serving precisely that purpose, asserting Ambrosio’s definition of love, which insists upon a sensual component as its essential quality even when extended to the possibility of afterlife. But as the nurse of ‘Fiordispina’ asks, ‘Who knows whether the loving game is played,/ When, once of mortal [vesture] disarrayed,/ The naked soul goes wandering here and there/ Through the wide deserts of

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<sup>199</sup> *Thalaba*, VIII, l. 133.

<sup>200</sup> The fact that the sadistic, intensely morbid Ambrosio proves to be Antonia’s long-lost brother certainly does not harm his identification with the traditional family-tormenting vampire.

Elysian air?’<sup>201</sup> Ambrosio himself does not go so far into illusion, but does mistake his keen sexual desire, unrestrainedly indulged, as a source of potential pleasure as opposed to a physical pain, relieved at a greater spiritual cost of despair and ‘sullen apathy’ (329):

The very excess of his former eagerness to possess Antonia now contributed to inspire him with disgust; and a secret impulse made him feel how base and unmanly was the crime which he had just committed. (328-9)

What seduced me into crimes, whose bare remembrance makes me shudder?  
Fatal witch! was it not thy beauty? Have you not plunged my soul into infamy?  
Have you not made me a perjured hypocrite, a ravisher, an assassin? Nay, at this moment, does not that angel look bid me despair of God’s forgiveness? (330)

Even in the depths of personal despair, the rapist does not refrain from attributing ‘guilt’ to his victim who, in spite of her former ignorance of all matters sexual (221-3), is conversant enough in patriarchal lore to feel that unsought guilt: “‘Is not my ruin completed? Am I not undone, undone for ever? [...] let me return to my home, and weep unrestrained my shame and my affliction!’” (329) Regarding this request, the compromise Ambrosio resolves upon confirms him as ‘the living sepulchre of himself,’ and confirms his compulsion to inflict this living death upon his ‘lover’. He determines for her not to die outright but

To linger out a life of misery in a narrow loathsome cell, known to exist by no human being save her ravisher, surrounded by mouldering corpses, breathing the pestilential air of corruption, never more to behold the light, or drink the pure gale of heaven [...]. (332)

<sup>201</sup> ‘Fiordispina,’ l. 78-81 (fragment, 1820).

In this case, pleasure is not a reciprocal component of the relationship between vampire or pseudo-vampire and victim. One could cite gradations in the various Romantic treatments of this subject – in *Christabel*, *Zastrozzi* and ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ there is distinct interaction of sadism and masochism – but Lewis depicts a situation of pure sadism.<sup>202</sup> The legacy of vampire to victim – as is the initial case in *The Cenci*, III. i – is despair, which in the cases of Antonia and Beatrice is reinforced by the social stigmas of patriarchy.

In this respect the male ‘vampire’ has the advantage, but the allegorical figure of despair – notwithstanding its unequivocally male Spenserian precursor<sup>203</sup> – was frequently allocated a female

<sup>202</sup> It may be worth noting that there is some similarity between Lewis’ depiction of the rape of Antonio, and of the brutal assault and murder carried out by the mob of citizens upon the prioress of St. Clare, with vague suggestions of sexual assault upon the corpse (‘ill-used’).

The rioters heeded nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance. They refused to listen to her: they shewed her every sort of insult, loaded her with mud and filth, and called her by the most opprobrious appellations. They tore her one from another, and each new tormentor was more savage than the former. They stifled with howls and execrations her shrill cries for mercy, and dragged her through the streets, spurning her, trampling her, and treating her with every species of cruelty which hate or vindictive fury could invent. [...] She sank upon the ground bathed in blood, and in a few minutes terminated her miserable existence. Yet though she no longer felt their insults, their rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more than a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting. (306)

[...] her alarm, her evident disgust, and incessant opposition, seemed only to inflame the monk’s desires, and supply his brutality with additional strength. Antonia’s shrieks were unheard; yet she continued them, nor abandoned her efforts to escape, till exhausted and out of breath she sank from his arms upon her knees, and once more had resource to prayers and supplications. This attempt had no better success than the former. On the contrary, taking advantage of her situation, the ravisher threw himself by her side. He clasped her to his bosom almost lifeless with terror, and faint with struggling. He stifled her cries with kisses, treated her with the rudeness of an unprincipled barbarian, proceeded from freedom to freedom, and in the violence of his lustful delirium, wounded and bruised her tender limbs. (328)

Ambrosio attempts to conceal his guilt by hiding Antonia in the sepulchre, but his obsession with ‘rotting, loathsome, corrupted bodies’ (329) suggests an unconscious attempt to efface his guilt – which is tied to his recognition of Antonia as a living victim – by symbolically (and then literally) reducing her to ‘a mass of flesh,’ thus denying her any rights or consideration. His egotism is matched by the crowd, denying their victim the right of expression in an orgy of bestiality. As *Laon and Cythna* and *The Cenci* would later assert, the energies for sexual and social abuses spring from a common source.

<sup>203</sup> *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, IX, 33-54. All references taken from *Spenser: The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, text edited by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuka Suzaka (Harlow: Longman, 2001). Spenser’s ‘Despair’ is not a vampire, but does resemble a manifestation of death. Its close association with the repulsive physical signifiers of death belies its temptation of peaceful death:

Ere long they come, where that same wicked wight  
His dwelling has, low in an hollow caue, [...]  
Darke, dolefull, dreary, like a greedie graue,  
That still for carrion carcasses doth craue: [...]

avatar in Romantic works. That figure is explicitly assumed by Mary Shelley's (anti) heroine Matilda, as she attempts to persuade the idealistic poet Woodville to join her in suicide, in terms which may at least be described as sensual (though not explicitly sexual):

Behold, my cheek is flushed with pleasure at the imagination of death; all that we love are dead. Come, give me your hand, one look of joyous sympathy and we will go together and seek them; a lulling journey; where our arrival will bring bliss and our waking be that of angels. [...] Oh! that I had words to express the luxury of death that I might win you. [...] What fool on a bleak shore, seeing a flowery isle on the other side with his lost love beckoning to him from it would pause because the wave is dark and turbid? [...] I am a spirit of good, and not a human maid that invites thee, and with winning accents [...]. (201)

Her illusions of inhumanity are at all events consistent with the opinion she had formed of her father before his suicide, motivated by the guilt of his incestuous passion: she depicts him as a vampire-like being, allied to an even more vampire-like anthropomorphic 'despair':

[...] it was despair I felt; for the first time that phantom seized me; the first and

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That darke some caue they enter, where they find  
That cursed man, low sitting on the ground,  
Musing full sadly in his sullein mind;  
His griesie lockes, long growen, and vnbound,  
Disordred hong about his shoulders round,  
And hid his face; through which his hollow eyne  
Lookt deadly dull, and stared as astound;  
His raw-bone cheekes, through penurie and pine,  
Were shronke into his iawes, as he did neuer dyne.

His garment nought but many ragged clouts,  
With thornes together pind and patched was,  
The which his naked sides he wrapt abouts,  
And him beside there lay upon the gras  
A dreary corse, whose life away did pas,  
All wallowd in his owne yet luke-warme blood, (33-6).

only time for it has never since left me – After the first moments of speechless agony I felt her fangs on my heart: [...] my father was as dead to me, and I felt for a moment as if he with white hairs were laid in his coffin and I – youth vanished in approaching age, were weeping at his timely dissolution. But it was not so, I was yet young, Oh! far too young, nor was he dead to others; but I, most miserable, must never see or speak to him again. I must fly from him with more earnestness than from my greatest enemy: in solitude or in cities I must never behold him. (173-4)

This imaginary living-dead inexorable pursuer of Mary Shelley's 1819 novella reflects the parasitic mobility of Polidori's Ruthven: the famous (and explicitly-named) Romantic 'vampyre' of the same year, who trails his victim Aubrey from England, through Europe and back again under a new, 'posthumous' identity (having been shot and apparently killed), leaving the distraught Aubrey 'anxious to fly that image which haunted him.'<sup>204</sup> Polidori's 'vampyre' is in other characteristics the archetype of the figure. Not merely 'profligate and sensual', Ruthven is practically the allegorical figure of profligacy and sensuality. Though ostensibly the external agent of corruption or seduction, Polidori gives strong indications that his 'vampyre' has a literal significance as the realisation of latent or overt tendencies to vice and self-destruction:

[...] when the profligate came to ask something, not to relieve his wants, but to allow him to wallow in his lust, or to sink him still deeper in his iniquity, he was sent away with rich charity [...] all those upon whom it was bestowed, inevitably found that there was a curse upon it, for they were all either sent to the scaffold, or sunk to the lowest and most abject misery. (33-4)

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<sup>204</sup> John William Polidori, *The Vampyre: a tale* (London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1819), p. 63.

[...] he had required, to enhance his gratification, that his victim, the partner of his guilt, should be hurled from the pinnacle of unsullied virtue, down to the lowest abyss of infamy and degradation: in fine, that all those females whom he had sought, apparently on account of their virtue, had, since his departure, thrown even the mask aside, and had not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public gaze. (37)

The subjects of the first case are clearly brought to inevitable destruction by their own vices as opposed to supernatural ‘charity’, whatever its effects as a catalyst<sup>205</sup> here and elsewhere, with Ruthven adopting much the same function as the ‘servant’ fiends in Lewis and Dacre. ‘Scarcely could I propose crimes so quick as you performed them’<sup>206</sup> declares Satan – source of the corruption that ‘must be thought’ – to Ambrosio, who independently decides that it ‘may be done’ and acts accordingly. Concerning the victims of Ruthven’s sexual seductions, the suggestive word ‘mask’ and the matter of ‘unsullied virtue’ being a social (determined by the ‘public gaze’) rather than an intrinsic quality, strongly imply that these ‘apparently’ virtuous ladies are such as Wollstonecraft condemns for cherishing the mere reputation of physical chastity:<sup>207</sup> a significant factor in the spiritual decay of Beatrice Cenci. Ruthven’s activity is not so much to corrupt, as to enable existing seeds of corruption to flourish, and to force into the ‘public gaze’ the vices that society tacitly supports and conceals. Count Cenci’s agenda is not dissimilar, calculated to destroy the veneers of order and propriety to expose endemic corruption – in his words, ‘confound both night [associated with sin and concealment] and day [associated with the acceptable face of society]’ (*The Cenci*, II. i.

<sup>205</sup> I am indebted to David Punter’s comments on *The Vampyre* in *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group Ltd, 1996), pp. 103-4: ‘Ruthven transgresses the social norms, but he does so with the collaboration of his victims; he merely acts as a catalyst for repressed tendencies to emerge into the light of day.’

<sup>206</sup> *The Monk*, p. 374.

<sup>207</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 202:

I have known a number of women who, if they did not love their husbands, loved nobody else, give themselves entirely up to vanity and dissipation, neglecting every domestic duty; nay even squandering away all the money which should have been saved for their helpless younger children, yet have plumed themselves on their unsullied reputation, as if the whole compass of their duty as wives and mothers was only to preserve it.

183). Cenci, however, incorrectly believes that his actions will implant new seeds of corruption in Beatrice's soul, not recognising that the conventional 'virtues' she has accepted are in themselves a potent (and in his case, very ironic) moral stumbling-block.

Cenci, thus, proves not to be a true vampire, since his attempt to set himself up as a pure allegory terminates in self-destructive failure. Mary Shelley's *Matilda* suffers a similar check, almost 'killed' by the bloodsucking phantom of despair (she contemplates suicide) which eventually destroys but briefly recruits her father as an incestuous pseudo-vampire. She assumes much the same role in quoting Spenser, falsely taking upon herself the character of despair in person as opposed to her true status as its agent or subordinate. It is of considerable significance that of all the attributes of the folkloric vampire, as catalogued in detail by Southey, and of all the traits that a vampire may communicate to its victim, the Romantic authors entirely omit one that later became a mainstay: the inherited immortality of *Dracula* and subsequent treatments. The victims of Romantic revenants, from that of *Lenore* and Lewis's bleeding nun to Lord Ruthven, either decay and are only saved from death with assistance, or die altogether. Wish-fulfilment is a very minor, and sometimes non-existent component of these necrotic relationships. The temptations offered by Count Dracula significantly counterbalance his sadism, implying a liberation of sensual desire without fear of the spiritual consequence:<sup>208</sup> damnation following death, and it is a perfect fantasy, since even Dracula appears to claim diminished responsibility through demonic possession, as he dies with a smile of inner peace.<sup>209</sup> Ruthven, by contrast, offers brief, mundane and degrading indulgence followed by long and punishing despair. His victims are driven to their deaths, all deserving of Satan's words to Victoria: 'Thou hast enjoyed no moment of peace, nor even the smallest of those fruits for which thou wast reduced so deeply to sin!' (*Zofloya*, p. 267). Similarly, the proposed 'liberation' of forbidden desires in *Matilda* – namely, the possibility of an incestuous father-daughter relationship –

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<sup>208</sup> Another novel of the Fin de Siècle – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – bears comparison: Wilde depicts a similar fantasy, in which the same liberation is sought but with security only from the physical consequences of age and sensuality. This is also a component of the post-Stoker vampire-fantasy.

<sup>209</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 447.

creates only despair and death. As opposed to fantasies of immortality, vampirism here signifies pure self-destruction.

Shelley's most clear and sustained use of such a figure is the fragment 'Invocation to Misery', placed among the poems of 1818 by Mary Shelley in her 1839 edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works* but by more recent editors given a date of 1819.<sup>210</sup> His depiction of a female figure of death – 'Life-deserting Misery' (54) – is explicitly sensual and laced with overtones of incest: 'Misery! – we have known each other/ Like a sister and a brother' (11-12). Misery is a parasitic partner, capable of transforming her lover into a being after her own nature, which typically culminates in his oblivion: 'Clasp me, till our hearts be grown/ Like two shadows into one –/ Till this dreadful transport may/ Like a vapour fade away/ In the sleep which lasts away' (46-50). The tryst is somewhat of an exception to the rule in Shelley's works I earlier identified: the predominance of sadism and the lack of truly 'willing' masochism. Cythna, Laon, Prometheus and Beatrice are all tortured by sexual sadists of various degrees, and the latter three become complicit through weakness, but none of these episodes are consciously willed by the sufferers. By contrast, the poet-narrator of 'Invocation to Misery' passionately 'invokes', or rather seduces, the figure of his despair that will drive him to oblivion. He is, at all events, an unusually commanding masochist (compared to, for example, the yielding Verezzi). Misery herself is surprisingly passive, which at least fits with the distinctly necrophiliac tones of the poem:

Kiss me; – oh, thy lips are cold –  
 Round my neck thine arms enfold: –  
 They are soft, but chill and dead,  
 And thy tears upon my head

<sup>210</sup> See *PW*, pp. 559-60 (p. 559): 'Published by Medwin, *The Athenæum*, Sept. 8, 1832. Reprinted (as *Misery, a Fragment*) by Mrs. Shelley, *Poetical Works*, 1839, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.' More recently, the work has been published as 'Misery. – A Fragment' in *The POS*, vol. II, 1817-1819, eds. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 701-7. Everest and Matthews assign the 1819 composition date. The poem is quoted from this recent edition.



Burn like points of frozen lead.

Hasten to the bridal bed –

Underneath the grave 'tis spread;

In darkness may our love be hid,

Oblivion is our coverlid –

We may rest, and none forbid. – (36-45)

Here again the theme of prohibition is seen, from which the vampire-lover/ figure of despair offers an escape route: in this case, as in *Matilda*, oblivion. Though not wishing to dwell upon biographical elements, in this case, as in *Epipsychidion* (ll. 267-383), there is little point in avoiding this aspect of Shelley's work. The omission of intimately personal stanzas in 'Invocation to Misery'<sup>211</sup> inevitably serves to enhance this aspect in the published form of the 'Invocation,' and the similarities of Misery and the 'Moon' figure of *Epipsychidion*<sup>212</sup> – cold, passive lovers, 'nor alive nor

<sup>211</sup> *POS*, p. 706: 'When a mother clasps her child/ Watch till dusty Death has piled/ Its cold ashes on the clay –/ She has loved it many a day/ She remains ... it fades away.'

[...] the serious breakdown in relations between S. and Mary took place not in 1818 [...] but in Rome after the death of William, and Mary's possible unwillingness to publish the poem in 1824 may itself suggest that the poem dates from that period. The cancelled reference [...] to a mother clasping her dying 'boy' seems to confirm an unnervingly direct personal reference for the poem. (p. 701)

<sup>212</sup> *Epipsychidion*, ll. 277-320:

[...] One stood on my path who seemed  
As like the glorious shape which I had dreamed  
As is the Moon, [...]  
The cold chaste Moon, the Queen of Heaven's bright isles [...]  
And there I lay, within a chaste cold bed:  
Alas, I then was nor alive nor dead: –

The biographical analysis of *Epipsychidion* interprets this figure as Mary Shelley. See *Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 231-8 (p. 231):

The widely accepted interpretation of the moon and sun imagery is that the moon stands for Mary (as she herself seems to have supposed) [...] and Mary is ticketed forever as the "chaste cold moon" smiling down upon the ice which locked poor Shelley's heart until Emilia warmed it with her sun-like smiles.

Baker offers an alternative, Platonic reading, but I see no reason to consider that either renders the other invalid. The views of Crook and Guiton bear comparison (*Shelley's Venomed Melody*, p. 146):

Critics who 'Platonise' the poem also tend to play down the autobiographical element, citing Shelley's

dead’ – strongly imply that Shelley had for this period extended his earlier analogy of the ‘dead and living body [...] in loathsome and horrible communion’ to depict his second marriage. His victimised stance, however, is not revived. In contrast, the poet of Misery is far more obviously keen than his listless mistress to ‘hasten to’ the nuptial grave and embrace his own destruction. ‘Love withers under constraint,’ and in self-imposed exile in 1819 the relationship of the Shelleys continued to labour under the disapprobation of parents and reviewers, financial pressures,<sup>213</sup> ill-health, and the tragedy of their children’s deaths.<sup>214</sup> Constraint was evidently taking effect, hence the uncharacteristic nihilism<sup>215</sup> of ‘Invocation to Misery’.<sup>216</sup> In the same eroticised Spenserian vein as *Matilda*, a ‘union’ with ‘Life-deserting Misery’ – which amounts to a female Despair, or Death – is offered as the only escape from a joyless existence: ‘We may dream in that long sleep/ That we are not those who weep’ (51-2). The ‘coverlid’ of oblivion seems a tempting prospect when the

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concern lest it be reduced to the level of ‘a servant girl and her sweetheart’ and his description of the poem as ‘an idealised history of my life and feelings’. But the context in which the last remark occurs, a letter written to John Gisborne almost a year after the infatuation had ended, makes it clear that he did fantasise about a physical union with Emilia [...] and that ‘idealised’ does not mean ‘not factual’ but ‘transcending the *merely* personal’:

<sup>213</sup> In particular, the large demands of Godwin, in the light of his continuing disapproval of Shelley himself, could hardly have been regarded by Shelley in any light other than a punishment for breaking parental prohibition on free love. See Patricia Hodgart, *A Preface to Shelley* (London & New York: Longman, 1985), p. 36. Also Shelley’s letter to Leigh Hunt, Livorno, August 15, 1819:

Poor Mary’s spirits continue dreadfully depressed. And I cannot expose her to Godwin in this state. I wrote to this hard-hearted person (the first letter I had written for a year), on account of the terrible state of her mind, and to entreat him to try to soothe her in his next letter. The *very* next letter, received yesterday, and addressed to her, called her husband (me) “a disgraceful and flagrant person,” tried to persuade her that I was under great engagements to give him *more* money (after having given him £4,700), and urged her if she ever wished a connection to continue between him and her to force me to get money for him. – He cannot persuade her that I am what I am not, nor place a shade of enmity between her and me – but he heaps on her misery, stiff misery.  
(*Letters II*, p. 109)

Without explicit naming, Shelley here portrays his father-in-law as a vampire-like figure, not content merely to act the parasite but also intent upon infecting others with calumny, despair, and distrust, and thus bearing comparison with the more clearly morbid father-figure of *Matilda*.

<sup>214</sup> See *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 111. In the light of Crook and Guiton’s argument, which posits that Shelley may well have considered his ill-health to have been at least partially self-inflicted and of a venereal nature, this event attains a new significance: it implies that Shelley in 1819 might also have considered the deaths of William and Clara and the decline of his relationship with Mary as the result of his own (speculative) past failure to rise above the depraved, lustful English youth he derides in the Notes to *Queen Mab*, and thus an all-too clear demonstration of ‘sin embracing death.’

<sup>215</sup> Even the bleak vision of *The Cenci* is qualified by the Preface.

<sup>216</sup> The omitted stanza ‘When a King ascends a throne’ suggests an attempt to work some material of revolutionary import and universal significance into this despairing personal statement, which apparently did not meet with success. *POS*, p. 706.

imagination and philosophy fail to intuit or envisage immortality. *Laon and Cythna* demonstrates equal assurance that love and pleasure cannot endure in any form in an atmosphere of patriarchal oppression, but redeems worldly bleakness with an optimistic fantasy of the hereafter. Attainment of this, however, if at all possible, is only achievable by the truly enlightened and ideally-matched. Any other sexual union or attraction is suspect (as is Laon's attraction to Cythna before his conversion to idealism) and more often than not catastrophic. The escape-route of death, far from an ideal solution, may yet be preferable to accepting a sexually-active life within the 'constraint' of prescribed social codes, which are restrictive and sensual, and thus little better than necrophilia in any case.

“Tis an evil lot, and yet/ Let us make the best of it –/ If love can live when pleasure dies/ We two will love; till in our eyes/ This heart's Hell seem Paradise.’ (16-20) True pleasure – as Plato opposes to the cessation of the pangs of desire – is beyond the scope of a ‘love’ conceived under such constraint, as the post-coital self-loathing of Ambrosio demonstrates. His sudden conscious internalisation of the cultural prohibition against rape, and his unconscious internalisation of that against incest overshadows the sensual pleasure of his assault on Antonia. Ambrosio, in his position, is blatantly unable to find a means whereby he can placate his physical desires yet spare himself the more threatening torments of the super-ego. The poet-figure of ‘Invocation to Misery’ portrays himself in a similar bind: constraint has destroyed the positive pleasure of sympathy in love, promoting guilt and sensuality in its place. His condition, and relationship with his estranged, explicitly undead lover Misery – a figure of dual significance – affords contrast with the ‘general laws’ of consummated love Shelley lists in ‘A Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love,’ prefacing his translation of *The Symposium*:

1<sup>st</sup>. That the person selected as the subject of this gratification should be as perfect and beautiful as possible, both in body and in mind; so that all sympathies may be harmoniously blended, and the moments of abandonment be prepared by

the entire consent of all the conscious portions of our being; the perfection of intercourse consisting, not perhaps in a total annihilation of the instinctive sense, but in the reducing it to as minute a proportion as possible, compared with those higher faculties of our nature, from which it[s] derives a value.

2dly. Temperance in pleasure. This prevents the act which ought always to be the link and type of the highest emotions of our nature from degenerating into a diseased habit, equally pernicious to body and mind.<sup>217</sup>

There is some slight irony in Shelley's use of such prohibitive, pejorative terms as 'gratification,' which implies sensualism; and 'abandonment,' suggesting bestial lack of control even as Shelley depicts a temperate, sympathetic relationship. It may have been that Shelley employed such conventional and hardly idealistic registers in order to partially counterbalance the radical import (in contemporary terms) of his discourse: that all forms of merely physical sexuality are degraded whereas Platonic homosexuality is far more preferable and spiritually wholesome 'than the usual intercourse endured by almost every youth of England with a diseased and insensible prostitute.'<sup>218</sup> Even this, however, indicates a certain shift – or decline – of the author's own sympathies since the notes to *Queen Mab*, in which the prostitutes – here reduced to near-inanimate disease-spreading scourges – are more generously depicted as an oppressed underclass.

Misery – representing both despair and love under constraint – is similarly depicted as 'insensible'; 'cold', 'dead', 'Coy, unwilling' and 'silent' (3). Sympathy is impossible with this uncommunicative, incoherently 'murmuring' (33) lover. Her tears of 'frozen lead' are as poisonous, destructive and equivocal as the deadly crocodile tears of Fraud in *The Mask of Anarchy*.<sup>219</sup> A

<sup>217</sup> From James A Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), pp. 410-1.

<sup>218</sup> *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 412.

<sup>219</sup> This work dates from Autumn 1819, a few months after the speculated composition date of 'Invocation to Misery'. See ll. 14-21:

Next came Fraud, and he had on,  
Like Eldon, an ermined gown;

trustworthy emotional reaction from Misery's 'icy bosom' (34), though the poet sardonically (as he begins the stanza with a deprecatory 'Ha!' at l. 31) suggests it, would seem an improbable expectation. Taking her assumed sensibility and frozen, artificial tears into account, Misery has all the superficial qualities of an 'ideal' lover without the animation. Mary Wollstonecraft had already contended that the publicists of patriarchy could not hope to genuinely reduce their wives and lovers to childlike innocence and submission, contrary to their own principles of self-interest:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives.

[...] the parental design of Nature is forgotten, and the mere person, and that for a moment, alone engrosses the thoughts. [...] this heartless intercourse [...] depraves both sexes, because the taste of men is vitiated; and women, of all classes, naturally square their behaviour to gratify the taste by which they obtain pleasure and power.<sup>220</sup>

With natural reactions suppressed, sympathy discouraged in favour of self-preservation, and the beautiful 'mere person' exalted as the only worthy object of patriarchal desire, the jaded lover of Misery might as well 'court the worms which the soulless body of a beloved being generates', or

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His big tears, for he wept well,  
Turned to mill-stones as they fell.

And the little children, who  
Round his feet played to and fro,  
Thinking every tear a gem,  
Had their brains knocked out by them.

<sup>220</sup> *Rights of Woman*, pp. 88, 208.

court the corpse itself. Shelley's depictions of the decomposing female body in this letter and elsewhere<sup>221</sup> occasionally rival those of Lewis for repulsiveness, the bleeding nun, with her hollow eye-sockets and 'rotting fingers' (*The Monk*, p. 142) being a case in point. Benjamin Kurtz interprets this tendency to draw attention to the process of decomposition as a weakness in Shelley's work: an indication of all-too-conventional squeamishness that he was unable to get beyond until 'The Triumph of Life'. He writes of *Queen Mab*:

But an instinctive, glowing impatience with all that is ugly and cruel, and a constitutional regret and faintness in the face of the mortality of lovely beings and before all the imaged loathsomeness of the grave, are ever-present, always betraying him through his emotions into a dualism of good and evil that is inconsistent with those notes on their subjectivity which he added to *Queen Mab*. As yet he is unable completely to reconcile these instinctive dismays with a mood, attitude, or philosophy of victory over death. His love of the beautiful and his disgust of death has not been definitely harmonized.

It is Shelley's perennial problem, arising from his deep sensitiveness to beauty: his inability to reconcile himself with the death of beauty.<sup>222</sup>

Emotional control is not an easy matter to prove or disprove, although it is certainly contestable that the Platonic dualism Shelley establishes in his mature works does not fit so comfortably with this assessment as *Queen Mab*. It is also notable that in 'Invocation to Misery' – which makes no suggestion whatsoever of a possible 'victory over death' and instead presents the

<sup>221</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, Canto III, XXVI, 1333-5: 'A woman's shape, now lank and cold and blue,/ The dwelling of the many-coloured worm,/ Hung there [...]'. *Ginerva*, 206-16: 'She is still, she is cold/ On the bridal couch, [...] Ere the sun through heaven once more has rolled,/ The rats in her heart/ Will have made their nest,/ And the worms be alive in her golden hair [...]'.  
<sup>222</sup> Benjamin P Kurtz, *The Pursuit of Death: A Study of Shelley's Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 79, 325.

single most suicidal poet-narrator in Shelley's canon – the horrors of the grave are distinctly muted and Misery herself is more conspicuously inanimate than loathsome. There is a possible precedent for this sensual yet 'chill and dead' lover in the figure of another Spenserian 'vampire': the artificial, fiendishly animated 'snowy Lady' created by the witch of Book III, cantos VII-VIII, to satisfy the lust of her brutish son. Occupying the position of negative extreme on the spectrum of Spenser's female characters – where Shelley and his contemporaries could find clearly ideal figures that did not support the conventional patriarchal 'ideals' of weakness and sensibility<sup>223</sup> – this synthetic 'carkasse dead' is nevertheless a socially-conversant figure along much the same lines as the conditioned 'weak beings' whom Wollstonecraft laments:

A wicked Spright yfraught with fawning guile,  
 And faire resemblance about all the rest, [...]  
 Him needed not instruct, which way were best  
 Himselfe to fashion likest *Florimell*,  
 Ne how to speake, ne how to vse his gest,  
 For he in counterfeisance did excell,  
 And all the wyles of wemens wits knew passing well.<sup>224</sup>

The masculinity of this spirit affords considerable irony that Shelley might well have appreciated: the nature of lust being masculine, as Spenser spares no pains to make clear,<sup>225</sup> within a

<sup>223</sup> For example, when Mary Shelley's Matilda assumes the role of Spenser's Despair, the idealist poet Woodville counters her by assuming that of Una: Spenser's strong-minded female Avatar of truth from Book I of *The Faerie Queene* (*Matilda*, p. 202). Also, although it is doubtful Shelley would have approved per se of Britomart's preferred, and rather bloodthirsty way of life as an errant knight, the lofty disdain this heroine expresses for the conventional manner of life for high-born ladies 'in pleasures wanton lap' (*Faerie Queene*, III, II, 6) bears comparison with Wollstonecraft's: 'The same love of pleasure, fostered by the whole tendency of their education, gives a trifling turn to the conduct of women in most circumstances: [...] Can dignity of mind exist with such trivial cares?' (*Rights of Woman*, p. 129)

<sup>224</sup> *Faerie Queene*, III, VIII, 8.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. *Faerie Queene*, III, VII for Spenser's masculine personification of 'greedie lust': unsurprisingly, a bestial deformed, rapacious savage. Though not a vampire, this figure does, significantly, devour the bodies of its rape-victims (12) and thus establishes the predatory, unmutual nature of the purely sensual attraction. Furthermore, where Spenser depicts this vice in less primitive characters, they are more often than not male: the satyrs, Braggadocchio,

patriarchal society the female body thus becomes no more than an attractive veneer for the loathsome, spiritually-corrupting appetite that motivates the male sensualist but invokes only disgust at face value. The ‘snowy Lady’ embodies the nightmarish patriarchal fantasy of Wollstonecraft’s imagining:

[...] when [Milton] tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man [...]<sup>226</sup>

Spenser depicts precisely such a creature – albeit fiendishly animated rather than soulless – and in doing so demonstrates that the qualities cherished by the sensualist are superficial and unnatural, unattainable in any genuine sense but easily approximated through cynical artifice. In order to legitimise its own nature, which emphasises individual power and thus presupposes a master/ slave or rapist/ victim relationship, patriarchal lust requires this distorting mirror, conveying the impression that these oppressed positions are wholly natural to women and their inclinations.<sup>227</sup> Spenser, along with Wollstonecraft and Plato, rejects such essentialism with the assertion that all such characteristics are dependent on segregated systems of education.<sup>228</sup> No less than for Cenci,

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Cymochles, Paridell, the witch’s son, the fisherman, Proteus, Busyran &c.

<sup>226</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 88.

<sup>227</sup> Contrast Plato’s view in the *Republic*, p. 235: ‘[...] to make a woman into a Guardian we presumably need the same education as we need to make a man into one, especially as it will operate on the same nature in both.’

<sup>228</sup> Britomart’s unconventional education illustrates this point:

Faire Sir, I let you weete, that from the howre  
I taken was from nourses tender pap,  
I haue been trained vp in warlike stowre,  
To tossen speare and shield, and to affrap  
The warlike ryder to his most mishap;  
Sithence I loathed haue my life to lead,  
As Ladies wont, in pleasures wanton lap,  
To finger the fine needle and nyce thread;  
Me leuer were with point of foemans speare be dead. (*Faerie Queene*, III, II, 6)



though less overtly, all devotees of the Pandemian Aphrodite are required to take efforts in order to keep their lovers in a state of ‘inferiority and subservience.’ It thus follows that all men prepared to accept these conventions are potentially pseudo-vampires, following a course of action calculated to manipulate or to negate the nature of their lovers to create a weaker, masochistic reflection of their own sensual appetite, to the moral and spiritual detriment of both.

The poet of ‘Invocation to Misery’ is effectively forced into the service of the Pandemian Aphrodite against his own will, by an overpoweringly oppressive ‘wide world’ (61). Within the nihilistic terms of the poem, this constraint is inescapable except through death, and even that is a doubtful possibility. The poet acknowledges that the only harmony between himself and his lover – and all that is attainable under such circumstances – is their mutual death-work. Misery herself symbolises a union corrupted to a bond of mere sensuality, but it becomes apparent that both she and the poet/lover are ‘two shadows’ amidst ‘the shadows of the Earth’ (57). This image is of particular note, and not least on account of its lengthy recurrence in the closing stanzas of ‘The Triumph of Life’, which confirm Shelley’s enduring Gothic interest in spite of his recantation to Godwin. The phantom-shadows of both works are unequivocally spectral: ‘[...] like spectres wrapped in shrouds/ Fleet o’er Night in multitudes.’ (59-60) The physical setting of ‘Invocation to Misery’ is barely developed, but what little detail is given – that of mown grass (22) and the grave in particular – implies an appropriate graveyard for these ‘shadowy apparitions,’ as Plato depicts dead materialists and sensualists drifting, in a futile addiction to the physical, around their decayed mortal remains.

In spite of his contemptuous affirmation of this negative immortality, the poet pleads with Misery to join him in his descent from his ‘living sepulchre’ to the tomb proper, hoping as *Zastrozzi* did that eternal sleep (50-1) will be his lot. The belief that total disillusionment with the artificial, sensual ‘mockery’ (64) of worldly pleasure will at least spare him from the same aimless stasis as the drifting phantoms has here somewhat more foundation than in *Zastrozzi*, in which the barely-disguised but unmistakably Pandemian energies of the avenger ultimately negate his rejection of

personal lust: a vice he is all too ready to encourage in others. To Zastrozzi, Count Cenci, and the accomplished vampire or pseudo-vampire, those blind to the nature of the patriarchal order amount to ‘Puppets passing from a scene’ (63), whilst the aforementioned ‘anarchs’ establish themselves as the corrupt poets and playwrights who set the scene according to their own morbid ‘conceptions of right and wrong’,<sup>229</sup> accepting the predominance of egotism and the inevitability of evil.

The poet of ‘Invocation to Misery,’ at all events, is not such a corrupted figure as Count Cenci, but his inability to foster a relationship of sustaining Eros that might enable him, Laon-wise, to weather the ‘wide world’ with spiritual fortitude, ranks him as a sceptical creation and akin to the doomed wanderer of ‘Alastor’. Before I proceed to this work, in which another seemingly parasitic ‘femme fatale’ has her part to play in the decay and demise of the initially idealistic protagonist, it is important to stress Misery’s allegorical significance. Shelley’s choice of a sexually-charged figure of despair may have been influenced by the figure of Life-in-Death from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, whose physical depiction is a similar mix of the erotically attractive and the repulsively cadaverous:

*Her lips are red, her looks are free,*

*Her locks are yellow as gold:*

Her skin is as white as leprosy,

And she is far liker Death than he;

Her flesh makes the still air cold.<sup>230</sup>

The long-established ‘link between sexual disease and leprosy’<sup>231</sup> which Shelley himself affirms in *The Cenci* – as the Count threatens to inflict ‘leprous stains’ upon his daughter (IV. i. 130)

<sup>229</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*. PP, p. 488.

<sup>230</sup> *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Lyrical Ballads* (1798), 186-90. All Coleridge citations are from *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Selected Poetry*, ed. Heather J. Jackson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>231</sup> Cf. *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, 91-4 (93).

– is unlikely to have escaped Coleridge’s notice, considering the sensual and inviting nature of this nevertheless revolting ‘femme fatale’. The phrase is particularly apt for a female figure who appears ‘far liker death’ than the familiar skeleton himself, and the scope of her corruption – compared to the merely physical attack of her ‘fleshless Pheere’ (180) – justifies the claim: her name and the ambient, deadening effect of her ‘chill flesh’ confirm her vampire-like nature. Like ‘Misery,’ and the Pandemian Aphrodite, she is a destroyer of human sympathy, imbuing (or infecting) her ‘intimates’ with the morbidly egotistic impression of being spiritually isolated in a dead world.

The similarity of Life-in-Death’s function to that of the ‘manifest fiend’ of *Thalaba* – to drive the protagonist to the self-consuming condition of despair – further suggests the Gothic influence, although Southey’s reanimated cadaver of *Thalaba* is more obviously a vampire than Coleridge’s allegorical ‘fiend’. Nor could Shelley’s ‘veiled maid’ of ‘Alastor’ be considered a vampire or a supernatural being save through implication, but the correspondences are significant. Physically, this figure is the antithesis of the cadaverous, listless Misery, displaying an erotic animation without any suggestion of artifice:

[...] Sudden she rose,  
 As if her heart impatiently endured  
 Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,  
 And saw by the warm light of their own life  
 Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil  
 Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,  
 Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,  
 Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips  
 Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.  
 His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess

Of love. [...] ('Alastor', 172-82)

It is strange to note that although the veiled maid is quite explicitly the 'Alastor' poet's vision of an ideal lover,<sup>232</sup> the desire for actual consummation is still depicted in terms of 'sickness' and sensual 'excess' dating back to *Zastrozzi*. Apparently, the necessary sensual component of Eros does not rest easily with the spiritual, even under ideal conditions. Since these conditions prove illusory, however, there is good reason to believe that this Eros is essentially Thanatos under a veil, in which case the poet's lapse into distinctly Pandemian desires is all too appropriate.

The veiled maid embodies a perfection of beauty, virtue, unaffected sexual attraction and spiritual harmony, which under favourable circumstances would completely divorce her from any analogies to the vampire, anthropomorphic death or despair. Her non-existence as an external reality, from the envisioning poet's perspective, is far from favourable, and reflects rather grimly upon other instances of Platonic idealism in Shelley's canon, when the Uranian Aphrodite is unattainable except in the imaginative realms. Here, she is definitively unattainable as an earthly figure that could help – without the compromise of the poet's ideals – to mollify the inescapable pleasure-pains of sexual desire. The effects of her apparition upon the devotee seem only preferable to those of her Pandemian counterpart on account of their lack of malicious virulence. At all events, the poet of 'Alastor' does not engage in Cencian efforts to drag others to his 'untimely grave' (Preface, p. 69), yet he leaves a legacy of 'pale despair and cold tranquillity' (718) to his admirers. Though not consciously acting the vampire, this 'surpassing Spirit' (714) falls far short of any idealistic achievement, and instead inadvertently manages to infect his own biographer – the 'Alastor' narrator – with 'his own hideous ill': the conviction of Life-in-Death.

This spiritual 'ill' signals its presence with the symptoms of physical infirmity. Crook and

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<sup>232</sup> See the Preface to 'Alastor': 'Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture.' *PP*, p. 69.

Guiton discuss the underlying presence of ‘the spectre of syphilis’<sup>233</sup> in ‘Alastor’, emphasising the significance of the poet’s ‘withered hair’ (413). They proceed to trace this same image through later works such as ‘Rosalind and Helen’ and *Epipsychidion*.<sup>234</sup> If their interpretation of this trope may be applied to further works, it must bear an ironic dual significance in *The Cenci*, where the count’s ‘thin gray hair’ (IV. iii. 10) is more overtly a symbol of his age-derived authority (I. iii. 100-1; V. iv. 23). Understood, however, as a symptom of syphilis, it establishes that Count Cenci’s power, sexual corruption and self-destruction are intimately linked.<sup>235</sup> The ‘Alastor’ poet is by no means so depraved a figure, and his sufferings (following prolonged disregard of the opposite sex) cannot be passed off as syphilitic decay per se (Crook and Guiton do not make this assumption). His physical withering nevertheless implies an insidious universality of ego-corrupted sexuality, not confined to the blatantly sensual and degraded, which even ‘strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction’ (Preface, p. 69) and which within the scheme of ‘Alastor’ itself, seems tragically unavoidable. The ideal the poet worships is distinct in character from Cenci’s negative ideal (the god of power), but identical in kind: ‘His likeness in the world’s vast mirror shown’ (*Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3248), and thus no more capable of resurrecting him from his ‘living sepulchre’. According to Diotima’s stages of spiritual ascent, apprehension of the absolute form of beauty initially requires the contemplation of the inferior beauty in earthly forms. The poet dismisses the intermediate stages of spiritual development and attempts to directly attain the absolute form of beauty, when in fact the form he pursues is a shadow of his own ego. Little hope remains that this

<sup>233</sup> *Venomed Melody*, Chapter 10, pp. 156-80 (p. 161).

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

One of the passages of Shelley’s poetry which Hunt found ‘perfectly transparent’ is from *Epipsychidion*. There Shelley wrote of having encountered ‘One, whose voice was venomed melody’ whose ‘touch was as electric poison’. ‘Flame’ and ‘a killing air’ came out of her looks [...] ‘until, as hair grown gray/ O’er a young brow, they hid its unblown prime/ With ruins of unseasonable time’ (lines 256-66) [...] Hunt’s last sentence alludes to the belief that premature grey hair was a result of sexual errors. [...] Hunt seems to be offering a hint that Shelley’s ardent flight into Platonism, the search for the ‘ideal’ beauty ‘beneath’ the material appearance of nature, had been an escape from the ‘pestilent and abhorrent brutalities’ of ‘real’ life.

<sup>235</sup> It may be worth noting the dates of the historical Francesco Cenci – 1549-1598 – which allow for the possibility that the Shelley version’s ‘snow white and venerable hairs’ (I. i. 39) are somewhat before their time. Notwithstanding that Shelley does not follow the historical details to the letter, Cenci’s account of his physical decay (I. i. 92-117) does suggest that his sensual lifestyle has contributed at least as much to his ageing process as nature.

isolated ego is destined for any more enviable fate than dissolution: ‘Scattering its waters to the passing winds’ (570), shadow and all.

The question remains as to whether or not this error is attributable to a fault inherent in the poet or universal in his wider context – as in ‘Invocation to Misery’ – concerning which we may look to Shelley’s Preface for a somewhat conflicted analysis.<sup>236</sup> As Shelley insists upon the instructive values of ‘Alastor’ he emphasises the culpability of its protagonist, albeit as the result of delusion rather than deliberation:

The picture is not barren of instruction to actual men. The Poet’s self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin. But that power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences, dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meaner spirits that dare to abjure its dominion. [...] loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, [...] They are morally dead. [...] Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. All else, selfish, blind, and torpid, are those unforeseeing multitudes who constitute, together with their own, the lasting misery or loneliness of the world.

(Preface, p. 69)

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<sup>236</sup> I am inclined to support Carlos Baker’s opinion of the two-paragraph Preface and title of ‘Alastor’. *Shelley’s Major Poetry*, pp. 44-5:

Much of the prevailing confusion about the meaning of the poem can be traced to Peacock’s generally misunderstood explanation of the title, and to the second or final paragraph of the preface, which looks very much like an ex post facto attempt by Shelley to moralize his song and to justify Peacock’s nomenclature. [...] [In Peacock’s words] The Greek word *Alastor* is an evil genius. ... The poem treated the spirit of solitude as a spirit of evil. [...] “At a loss for a title,” he accepted Peacock’s rather esoteric suggestion. It then became his task to explain the poem in terms of the new title without the need of revising the text itself.

Exempted from these contemptible multitudes, the poet is a tragic yet comparatively admirable figure, however doubtful his own redemption seems. Something as yet unspecified has driven him into his ‘generous error’ (ibid.), ensuring that his essentially commendable ideals culminate in failure.<sup>237</sup> Even his ‘self-centred seclusion’, which reads like an indictment or a curse in this paragraph, is initially presented as the first stage in a spiritual development, which receives a very ironic check that reflects as badly upon the poet’s fellow beings as it does upon the poet:

The poem [...] represents a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. [...] So long as it is possible for his desires to point towards objects thus infinite and unmeasured, he is joyous, and tranquil, and self-possessed. But the period arrives when these objects cease to suffice. His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. [...] the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. [...] He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. (Preface, p. 69)

The poet’s failure to commune with a similar intelligence, which traps him in the realms of his own, complicates the issue of any ‘instruction’ that may be derived from ‘Alastor’. Whilst there is certainly no doubt that he is an ‘alienated’ (76), egocentric and ultimately self-destructive figure after the best traditions of Gothic and male Romantic fiction – a true hybrid of Faust and Werther –

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<sup>237</sup> Evan K Gibson, ‘Alastor: A Reinterpretation.’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 62 (1947), pp. 1022-42. Reprinted in *PP*, pp. 545-69 (p. 551):

This “generous error” (Preface) arose from a desire which must be highly admired – the desire to find truth, to find the meaning of life and of the universe. And what heightens the tragedy of the poet’s death is the fact that it was caused by an exclusive emphasis upon this very quality which was so commendable in his life.

there is considerable doubt that the poet could hope to escape ‘darkness and extinction’ by compromising his ideals, and that is the only alternative on offer within the world of ‘Alastor’.

Whether or not we choose to read any ambiguities into the phrase ‘intercourse with an intelligence,’ we can entertain little doubt that none of the stated prerequisites of the ideal lover are counted as expendable. The potential of physical intercourse to degenerate ‘into a diseased habit, equally pernicious to body and mind’ is confirmed in ‘Invocation to Misery,’ but remains ‘the act which ought always to be the link and type of the highest emotions of our nature.’ Notwithstanding Shelley’s lifelong attachment to the sadistic, egotistic world of the Gothic, Aristophanes’ myth – sexuality as the union of the divided being – remains an alternative, or at least an idealistic hope, but a decidedly restrictive one. The erotic passion needs must be fulfilled on all levels if mortality is to be transcended. ‘The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense,’ (Preface, p. 69) must all be satisfied if the ‘furies of an irresistible passion’ are to be quelled and ‘speedy ruin’ avoided.

Shelley’s imagery of pursuing, parasitic spirits – each a *Doppelgänger* to embody the poet’s spiritual ‘vacancy’ and sexual desire – establishes the close links which ‘Alastor’ shares with the Gothic genre and vampire-themed fiction of the period. The figure of Death in *Lenore* offers a Christian equivalent of this ‘speedy ruin’: having effectively rejected spiritual existence in excessive grief for the death of her lover,<sup>238</sup> an apparition of that lover escorts Lenore to the ‘bridal bed’. The apparent wish-fulfilment of her desires is cheated by the discovery that the ‘lover’ is a disguised

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<sup>238</sup> Gottfried August Bürger, *Lenore*, in *The Penguin Book of German Verse*, ed. Leonard Forster (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), pp. 178-90 (p. 182).

O Mutter! was ist Seligkeit?  
 O Mutter! was ist Hölle?  
 Bei ihm, bei ihm ist Seligkeit,  
 Und ohne Wilhelm Hölle! –  
 Lisch aus, mein Licht, auf ewig aus!  
 Stirb hin, stirb hin in Nacht und Graus!  
 Ohn’ ihn mag ich auf Erden,  
 Mag dort nicht selig werden.

[‘Oh, mother, what is salvation? Oh, mother, what is hell? Salvation is with him, and without William it is hell! Go out, my candle, out for ever, die, die in night and horror! Without him there is no salvation for me on earth or in heaven!’]



skeletal Death and the bridal bed, as in ‘Invocation to Misery’, proves to be ‘Underneath the grave’. Bürger presents sexual desire entirely in the Pandemian aspect, even within the confines of establishment monogamy, as a spiritual malaise. Shelley’s purposes in ‘Alastor’ are not so straightforward, but nor are they diametrically opposed: the poet too is escorted to his (possibly eternal) death by the phantom of a lover – a cruelly ironic figure representing an impossible wish-fulfilment. Desire, disappointment and death provide the structure, and also clearly serve that purpose in *The Monk*, *Zofloya* and Goethe’s *Die Braut von Korinth*, in which the *fatale* vampire ‘bride’ is reanimated by the strength of her unfulfilled sexual cravings.<sup>239</sup> Failure to legitimately satisfy even the physical imperatives of Eros endangers spiritual development,<sup>240</sup> although not as certainly as excessive sensual indulgence: Ambrosio and Victoria consign their souls to oblivion,

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<sup>239</sup> Goethe, *Die Braut von Korinth/ The Bride of Corinth*, in *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Middleton, trans. Christopher Middleton and Michael Hamburger (London: John Calder, 1983), pp. 132-43 (pp. 140-3).

Aber aus der schwerbedekten Enge  
 Treibet mich ein eigenes Gericht.  
 Eurer Priester summende Gesänge  
 Und ihr Segen haben kein Gewicht;  
 Salz und Wasser kühlt  
 Nicht, wo Jugend fühlt;  
 Ach! Die Erde kühlt die Liebe nicht.  
 [...]  
 Aus dem Grabe werd ich ausgetrieben,  
 Noch zu suchen das vermißte Gut,  
 Noch den schon verlorenen Mann zu lieben  
 Und zu saugen seines Herzens Blut.  
 Ists um den geschehn,  
 Muß nach andern gehn,  
 Und das junge Volk erliegt der Wut.

Strange is the law that me perforce has brought now  
 Forth from the dark-heaped chamber where I lay;  
 The croonings of your priests avail but nought now,  
 Powerless their blessings were, I say.  
 Water nor salt in truth  
 Can cool the pulse of youth:  
 Love still burns, though buried under clay.  
 [...]  
 From my grave betimes I have been driven,  
 I seek the good I lost, none shall me thwart,  
 I seek his love to whom my troth was given,  
 And I have sucked the lifeblood from his heart.  
 If he dies, I will  
 Find me others, still  
 With my fury tear young folk apart.

<sup>240</sup> See Shelley’s condemnation of chastity in the Note to *Queen Mab*, V. 189.

whereas Goethe's vampire and Lenore may still entertain hopes of divine mercy. The poet's demise is also not entirely void of hope,<sup>241</sup> although the final despairing sentiments of the narrator inspire only slight confidence. As the Preface implies, the poet's actions and opinions are certainly more forgivable than those of the 'torpid' multitude, but it does not follow that redemption will be granted on the basis of 'generous error'. A 'generous error', as Lenore, Goethe's young Athenian, Thalaba, and Aubrey of *The Vampyre* variously discover, may nevertheless be a mortal or near-mortal error.

The poet's premature 'withering,' aside from its venereal implications, is also typical of the Romantic encounter, or affinity with a vampire-like figure. Such is the fate of Lewis's Don Raymond, Polidori's Aubrey, Goethe's young Athenian, and in spite of her redemption from suicidal despair, Mary Shelley's Matilda:

In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud [...] for sixteen years I was happy: during the first months of my father's return I had enjoyed ages of pleasure: now indeed I am grown old in grief; my steps are feeble like those of age; I have become peevish and unfit for life; so having passed little more than twenty years upon the earth I am more fit for my narrow grave than many are when they reach the natural term of their lives.

(*Matilda*, p. 208)

Her judgement of herself as 'unfit for life' on the basis of her emotional disillusionment establishes that Matilda's position is similar to the 'self-centred seclusion' which Shelley accuses his visionary poet of fostering, to his 'speedy ruin'. It is certainly opposed to the principles of Matilda's

<sup>241</sup> Gibson (*PP*, p. 567):

[...] Shelley points out the alternative. These grim aspects "were not all; – one silent nook was there" (ll. 571-573). As was illustrated in the figure of the cove beside the maelstrom (ll. 387-408), there may be more than wishful thinking in the hope of individual existence after death. There may be a tranquil nook where at least such surpassing spirits as this youth will rest eternally.

idealistic, would-be Platonic lover Woodville – a heavily idealised portrait of Shelley himself. Woodville’s argument against Matilda’s egotistic world-view, in which it is particularly asserted that potential luminaries owe it to the human race not to succumb to despair and self-destruction,<sup>242</sup> is implied, though never so plainly stated, in the Preface and epilogue of ‘Alastor’. ‘Art and eloquence,/ And all the shows o’ the world are frail and vain/ To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.’ (710-12) At the scene of the poet’s death – by which time either his corrosive self-absorption is unmitigated, or at all events he has never spared any sympathy for the human race – the narrator’s attribution to him of luminary status defies credibility. Shelley leaves his reader in no doubt as to the poet’s early potential for repealing ‘Large codes of fraud and woe’:<sup>243</sup> ‘The fountains of divine philosophy/ Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great,/ Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past/ In truth or fable consecrates, he felt/ And knew.’ (71-5) Equally, he leaves us in no doubt that the poet failed to communicate this desirable knowledge to the benefit of humanity: ‘He lived, he died, he sung, in solitude./ Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,/ And virgins, as unknown he passed, have pined/ And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.’ (60-3) Before his own misadventure with Eros, the poet is imparting the sense of spiritual vacancy and sexual desire to others, and offering a solution to neither. In spite of the narrator’s ‘pale despair’ the ability of society to survive the loss does not seem in any great doubt. The reasons for the poet’s inability, or unwillingness to be integrated with the community, however, require examination.

Although the poet is unaware of the destructive effects of his inadvertent contact with society, the failing is a hallmark of even the well-intentioned Romantic exile. Faust certainly does not intend to condemn Margareta and her family to death and disgrace through his courtship, no more than Byron’s Cain intends to kill his brother when he sceptically assents to make a sacrifice to

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<sup>242</sup> *Matilda*, pp. 202-3:

Let us suppose that Socrates, or Shakespeare, or Rousseau had been seized with despair and died in youth when they were as young as I am; do you think that we and all the world should not have lost incalculable improvement in our good feelings and our happiness thro' their destruction. [...] if I can influence but a hundred, but ten, but one solitary individual, so as in any way to lead him from ill to good, [...] let that be motive sufficient against suicide.

<sup>243</sup> *Mont Blanc*, 81.

Jehovah.<sup>244</sup> Though both are clearly established as outcasts even before these fatal (albeit, in Cain's case, half-hearted) attempts to associate with the community, the results serve to confirm and deepen their exile. The 'Alastor' poet's limited contact with society proves no more propitious: the impression he leaves in his 'fleeting' sojourns – assisted no doubt by his radically 'decaying frame' and 'withered skin' (245-54) – is very much that of an undead 'visitant' (257). He inspires 'wondering awe' in his charitable hosts (256), as Lord Ruthven never fails to evoke in society, and fear in children (262-6), who can recognise the horrifying aspects of the figure without being in danger of contracting any share of his introverted passions. The same cannot be said of the 'youthful maidens' (266) he encounters, who

[...] taught

By nature, would interpret half the woe  
 That wasted him, would call him with false names  
 Brother, and friend, would press his pallid hand  
 At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path  
 Of his departure from their father's door. (266-71)

The poet's indifference and tacit rejection of the 'sweet human love' embodied in these maidens acquires an added significance from their implicit rejection of the asexual relationships 'brother' and 'friend'. For, as Gibson states, 'the name they wished to call him was "lover," showing his further opportunities for love.'<sup>245</sup> But the love on offer is evidently of a limited, and possibly of a Pandemian nature. The maidens interpret 'half the woe' the poet suffers – his unmistakable sexual longing, which is reciprocated in their futile advances – but fall short of complete sympathy with him. Ironically, it is the desire for total sympathy which comprises the poet's entire 'woe'. *Laon and*

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<sup>244</sup> *Cain*, III, i., ll.209-336.

<sup>245</sup> Gibson (*PP*, p. 558).

*Cythna* would promptly counterbalance the pessimism and egotism of ‘*Alastor*’, and present a relationship in which two lovers successfully manage to unite ‘all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture’, though in significantly different circumstances, as shall be seen. For the present, the sibling relationship of these ideal lovers is of prime importance.

Two incestuous relationships between sister and brother are averted in ‘*Rosalind and Helen*’, by a priest-led lynch gang (‘*Rosalind and Helen*’, 156-66) and by an unrelenting father (276-314); the champion of the patriarchal system. The consequences in both cases are dire, with three of the involved lovers ending up dead and one sister remaining ‘like a corpse alive!’ (312) The apparently weaker nature of *Rosalind*’s brother-lover, who spontaneously dies of despair (304-6), when considered alongside the evidently greater endurance and incorruptibility of *Cythna* compared to *Laon*, emphasises the dependence of the male lover upon his spiritual ideal.<sup>246</sup> the consequence of the masculine drive to Pandemian sexuality<sup>247</sup> under the weight of patriarchal convention, which is all too ready to seduce the male idealist with the sexual power ‘due’ to every non-incestuous heterosexual man. The ‘youthful maidens’ of ‘*Alastor*’ seem eager to confirm this artificial power: they implicitly reject the idea of a relationship that blends sexual fulfilment with Platonic sympathy,<sup>248</sup> and remain under the sway of their fathers. The only one of their number who is granted any individuality within ‘*Alastor*’ – the ‘Arab maiden’ of ll. 129-39 – likewise returns to her

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<sup>246</sup> See Bonca on Shelley’s use of idealised female ‘second selves’ (*Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 87):

As a “second” self, she appears to be a mere “shadow” or extension of the first self, but when, for instance, *Laon*’s “shadow,” *Cythna*, begins to overshadow him, we begin to question the stability of the terms Shelley and his hero have adopted [...]. As a woman, the second self may seem doomed to a supporting role in a sexist scenario, but when we recognise femininity as the “far goal” both of Shelley and of his male protagonists, the Shelleyan hero appears less powerful, less realized, and less complete than his feminine double.

<sup>247</sup> See *Rights of Woman*, p. 207: ‘Men are certainly more under the influence of their appetites than women, and their appetites are more depraved by unbridled indulgence and the fastidious contrivances of satiety.’ Though Wollstonecraft heavily leans away from biological essentialism to argue that education / socialisation is the defining influence. Shelley’s gender-fluid characterisations such as *Beatrice Cenci* emphasise this trope. Furthermore, the desire for sex in Shelley’s works is so bound up in the pursuit of power (which patriarchal convention encourages in men), it is shown that the apparently lustful ‘nature’ of men is a social (and not a natural) malaise.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. *Matilda*’s seduction of *Ambrosio* in *The Monk*, p. 80: ‘I prize you no more for the virtues of your soul; I lust for the enjoyment of your person. [...] Away with friendship! ‘tis a cold unfeeling word: my bosom burns with love [...].’

‘cold home’ (138) and her parental patriarch, but not without having attempted to transfer her subservient ‘duties’ (132) to the poet, as would-be husband. Whilst one could cite positive examples of father-figures within Shelley’s canon,<sup>249</sup> the overwhelming significance of this figure is generally inauspicious, as in ‘Rosalind and Helen’, and frequently repugnant, as in *Zastrozzi*, *The Cenci*, *Laon and Cythna/ The Revolt of Islam*, and, indeed, upon its other manifestation in ‘Rosalind and Helen’: the husband of Rosalind; ‘a tyrant’ (261) to his own family. The father in Shelley is typically the figurehead of the patriarchal establishment, either in an officious self-righteous manner or in a blatantly sadistic and arbitrary manner (the latter stance being distinctly more honest, since the patriarchal system is founded on arbitrary distinctions). The faceless fathers of ‘Alastor’ are certainly not among Shelley’s most disturbing patriarchal avatars, but the return of the ‘youthful maidens’ – the reality the poet fatally rejects in favour of his vision – to their household pillars of patriarchy, leaves open the possibility that the poet has in fact escaped a more ignominious fate: ‘a slow and poisonous decay’ amongst the ‘unforeseeing multitudes’.

It is certainly necessary, however, to read beyond ‘Alastor’ itself in order to reach this conclusion with any great confidence, since the poem attaches no such palpable depravity to established human society as is seen in the later works. That human depravity – and especially the patriarchal ‘economy’ of ‘love’ – provides Shelley with considerable material in *Queen Mab* at least prompts us to think it unlikely that he had softened his opinion for ‘Alastor’, only to resume his social condemnation in *Laon and Cythna*. Nevertheless, Josiah Conder’s commentary upon ‘Alastor’ seems to attempt what would seem very unlikely in the wider context: to make Shelley out as a champion of the establishment work ethic and a severe detractor of the poetic imagination.<sup>250</sup>

<sup>249</sup> The hermit of *Laon and Cythna/ The Revolt of Islam*, and Prometheus come to mind.

<sup>250</sup> From *Eclectic Review*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, VI (Oct 1816), pp. 391-3. Cited from *Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. I, p. 328. Conder’s review, incidentally, is by far from being complimentary. In a highly ironic contrast to Shelley’s Tory reviewers, who lavished invective upon his works for their contempt of establishment values, the *Eclectic Review* dismisses ‘Alastor’ on account of its bleak anticlimax and what Conder believes to be its unpoetic, grimly practical, anti-imaginative argument:

we have glitter without warmth, succession without progress, excitement without purpose, and a search which terminates in annihilation. [...] The Author has genius which might be turned to much better account; but such heartless fictions as Alastor, fail in accomplishing the legitimate purposes of poetry.

The poem is adapted to shew the dangerous, the fatal tendency of that morbid ascendancy of the imagination over the other faculties, which incapacitates the mind for bestowing an adequate attention on the real objects of this 'work day' life, and for discharging the relative and social duties. It exhibits the utter uselessness of imagination, when wholly undisciplined, and selfishly employed for the mere purposes of intellectual luxury, without reference to those moral ends to which it was designed to be subservient.<sup>251</sup>

Considering those works of Shelley's which are less obscure in purpose, we could easily read into 'Alastor' an argument for activism on the part of such gifted individuals as the poet, as opposed to wasting away their knowledge and talents in egotism and melancholy. This is liable, again, to recall Faust, and whilst Baker argues against interpreting the 'fair fiend' of line 297 as the veiled maid/ guiding spirit of the poet in the aspect of a female Mephistopheles, the very Gothic conjunction suggests the attractive, disguised demons of Lewis and Dacre. Even Baker's alternative explanation strongly suggests the figure of a female death:

Professor Havens believed that the words refer to the visionary maiden. But they seem rather to refer to the enigmatic figure of death, whom the poet regards as a kind of *ignis fatuus*. In the preceding lines, the youth has watched a swan fly back to its mate. He thinks of its flight as a symbol of his own desire to rejoin the vanished maiden of his dream – a desire which leads him seriously to consider the notion of suicide.<sup>252</sup>

At all events, the veiled maid is no Uranian Aphrodite. Dante's Beatrice, although

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 44.

encountered by the reader as a spiritual ideal, was formerly the earthly focus of a far more conventionally erotic attraction to her poet-lover. As the *Symposium* depicts, this is the correct philosophical path, as the ideal must initially be apprehended through the mundane. Without the human community he so casually disdains, the poet can achieve nothing with his accumulated knowledge and imaginative skills beyond the creation of exquisite self-destructive fantasies, which Conder is particularly alert to. The significant omission in his commentary is the erotic aspect of ‘Alastor’, which is remarkable considering the primary importance Shelley attaches to this throughout the work and the Preface (which Conder quotes at length). What is certainly not obscure in ‘Alastor’ is the poet’s semi-admirable, though deeply misguided refusal to compromise his idealism, which underlies his rejection of the submissive, nondescript mass of ‘youthful maidens’. The uncompromising attitude Shelley demonstrates in his Preface to the *Symposium*, stressing his own particular views as much as Plato’s,<sup>253</sup> could be used to argue a measure of sympathy for this egotistic but well-intentioned character: ‘[...] the person selected as the subject of this gratification should be as perfect and beautiful as possible, both in body and in mind; so that all sympathies may be harmoniously blended’. Certainly, within the world of ‘Alastor’, the poet is positively required to envision such a figure for himself. Before one argues that Shelley may have been prepared, in 1815, to endorse compromises in human relationships that he would thus denounce in 1819 (and bearing in mind his recently-terminated first marriage, which he had evidently considered a personal compromise and spiritual hazard, or argued as much to Hogg), it is as well to recall that since *Zastrozzi* Shelley had drawn a sharp, Platonic division between relationships of a purely sexual nature, and those based upon closer sympathies and spiritual sustenance.

A friend or Socratic lover capable of providing such sustenance seems, on the face of things, unavailable to the ‘Alastor’ poet. The insincere attitudes of the cottage maidens, however free from

<sup>253</sup> Based upon the *Symposium*, p. 92: although lovers in the second stage of the ascent to absolute beauty learn to rate ‘beauty of soul more valuable than beauty of body’ and to love ‘a virtuous soul in a body which has little of the bloom of beauty’, intellectual equality between the philosophical lover and the beloved does not seem to be required. Considering Alcibiades to be the beloved of Socrates, this is perhaps just as well. Shelley may derive his strong belief in the desirability of equal partnerships from Aristophanes’ comic allegory of the division of humanity into ‘halves’, and undoubtedly with further influence from Wollstonecraft.



malicious self-interest, are a reminder that Hell has space reserved for the mutual sensualists as well as the egotists (as in Dante's *Inferno*, Canto V). For when 'Brother, and friend' are dismissed from the equation, only sexuality remains, as the strictures of patriarchy intend. These would be overcome in *Laon and Cythna*, but 'Alastor' chooses not to present any certain escape route: the poet may either be withered to 'sudden darkness and extinction' by unfulfilled Eros, or he could prolong the withering and delay the extinction, with no better ultimate result, by submitting to purely sexual relationships among the Pandemian-devoted multitudes. Although his solitary existence is a wasted endeavour, society shares in the culpability through its institutionally-cultivated inability to present him with a material soul-mate – a compound which transcends its cliché value as far as Shelley's works are concerned.

Such is the imagined character of the poet's vision – a 'mate' who can sympathise with him on all levels – yet ultimately she proves of a similar nature to the 'fair fiends' of Lewis and Dacre: a fatal, self-deluding wish-fulfilment to catalyse a life turned morbid and stagnant by an egotism which is at least partially the imposition of social constraint.<sup>254</sup> Believing himself to be pursuing his

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<sup>254</sup> Cf. *The Monk*, pp. 203-7. Ambrosio is corrupted from his inborn virtue by the education of the Capuchins, in a passage that owes a great deal to the opening of Rousseau's *Émile, or On Education*, introduction, translation and notes by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1979), p. 37:

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man. [...] In the present state of things a man abandoned to himself in the midst of other men from birth would be the most disfigured of all. Prejudices, authority, necessity, example, all the social institutions in which we find ourselves submerged would stifle nature in him and put nothing in its place.

Compare the following (*The Monk*, pp. 203-5):

Had [Ambrosio's] youth been passed in the world, he would have shown himself possessed of many brilliant and manly qualities. [...] His instructors carefully repressed those virtues, whose grandeur and disinterestedness were ill suited to the cloister. [...] While the monks were busied in rooting out his virtues, and narrowing his sentiments, they allowed every vice which had fallen to his share to arrive at full perfection. He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful [...] For a time spare diet, frequent watching, and severe penance cooled and repressed the natural warmth of his constitution: but no sooner did opportunity present itself, no sooner did he catch a glimpse of joys to which he was still a stranger, than religion's barriers were too feeble to resist the overwhelming torrent of his desires.

Victoria of *Zofloya* is driven into self-reliant egotism by circumstances and social convention: the abandonment of her mother, the inevitable stigma resulting from the seduction, and the insulting attentions of Berenza, whom she marries (conventionally enough, by Wollstonecraft's assessment) out of pure self-interest, with no sympathy felt or considered on either side. Berenza's 'proud and dignified attachment, softened into a doating and idolatrous love.' (*Zofloya*, p. 125) This supposed 'philosopher' (p. 125) has remarkably mundane priorities on the subject of love. Although only ever implicit, Dacre's commentary on the standards of patriarchy casts a considerable shadow over her ostensibly admirable male characters.

Beatrice to her ‘mysterious paradise’ (212), the poet is in fact waylaid and destroyed by the Siren of his own dream.<sup>255</sup> In his case, the intervention of a benevolent ‘Spirit’ (479) of nature proves insufficient to counteract the lure of the siren. Dorothy L. Sayer’s interpretation of this corresponding episode of the *Purgatorio* is illuminating not only as regards ‘Alastor’, but in relation to supernatural ‘lovers’ throughout Romantic and Gothic fiction. Dante’s Siren, writes Sayers:

[...] is at first sight unattractive; she only acquires strength and beauty from Dante’s own gaze. She is, therefore, the projection upon the outer world of something in the mind: the soul, falling in love with itself, perceives other people and things, not as they are, but as wish-fulfillments of its own: i.e. its love for them is not love for a “true other” [...] but a devouring egotistical fantasy, by absorption in which the personality

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[...] the luckless Berenza was sometimes, in the momentary sting of disappointed hope, compelled to acknowledge, that though the situation of a wife might have rendered more *respectable* the object of his love, it had for ever destroyed the charms and fascination of the mistress [...]. (p. 129)

<sup>255</sup> Dante, *Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), Canto XIX, 7-33, pp. 216-7:

In dream a woman sought me, halt of speech,  
Squint-eyed, on maimed feet lurching as she stept,  
With crippled hands, and skin of sallowy bleach.

I gazed; and as to cold limbs that have crept  
Heavy with night, the sun gives life anew,  
Even so my look unloosed the string that kept

Her utterance captive, and right quickly drew  
Upright her form that all misshapen hung,  
And strained her withered cheek to love’s own hue.

Then she began to sing, when thus her tongue  
Was freed – and such a spell she held me by  
As had been hard to break; [...]

Her lips yet move to that melodious flow  
When hard at hand a lady I espied,  
Holy, alert, her guiles to overthrow.

“O Virgil, Virgil, who is this?” she cried  
Indignant; and he came, with heedful eyes  
On that discreet one, and on naught beside.

The first he seized, and, rending her disguise  
In front, showed me her belly, which released  
So foul a stench, I woke with that surprise.

rots away into illusion. The Siren is, in fact, the “ancient witch” Lilith, the fabled first wife of Adam, who was not a real woman of flesh and blood, but a magical imago, begotten of Samael, the Evil One, to be a fantasm of Adam’s own desires. [...] In later legend, the magical fantasm of man’s own desire is the demon-lover called the *succubus* (or in the case of a woman, the *incubus*), intercourse with which saps the strength and destroys the life.<sup>256</sup>

One might conclude that the terms succubus/ incubus and vampire are extremely interchangeable during and following the Romantic period. Matilda of *The Monk* is explicitly a succubus and Goethe’s ‘bride’ a vampire, but both fulfil essentially the same function: to corrupt, briefly indulge, and finally destroy the male protagonist. By the same token, either name could be equally well applied to the *femmes fatales* of *Christabel*,<sup>257</sup> *Lamia*, and ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci,’ and even the veiled maid of ‘Alastor’ might, in fact, well be described as a ‘fair fiend’. Dante’s encounter with the siren on the Fourth Cornice (of Sloth) adds further weight to her inimical role:

The sin which in English is commonly called *Sloth* [...] is insidious, [...] it is that whole poisoning of the will which, beginning with indifference and an attitude of “I couldn’t care less”, extends to the deliberate refusal of joy and culminates in morbid introspection and despair. One form of it [...] is that withdrawal into an “ivory tower” of Isolation which is the peculiar temptation of the artist and the contemplative, and is popularly called “Escapism”.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>257</sup> Jonas Spatz, ‘The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge’s “Christabel”’, in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 90 (January 1975), pp. 107-16 (p. 111):

“Christabel” traces its heroine’s attempt to come to terms with her sexuality, [...] Geraldine is the projection of that sexuality, with its desire, fear, shame, and pleasure. The “witchcraft” that makes her beautiful or ugly, inviting or menacing, depends on Christabel’s changing attitude toward herself. [...] Much of the poem’s suspense arises from the question of whether Christabel will expel her conscious fantasies by acting them out with Geraldine or whether these fantasies will destroy her.

<sup>258</sup> *Purgatory*, p. 209.

This recalls the tone of Josiah Conder's review concerning the 'selfish employment' of the imagination, of which Shelley is certainly well aware in 'Alastor'. All arguments to the inevitability of the poet's demise notwithstanding,<sup>259</sup> to exonerate this figure entirely seems impossible. Although at least initially presented as a more admirable figure than the despairing, sardonic narrator of 'Invocation to Misery', the 'Alastor' poet is finally depicted in a similar stance of solitary, suicidal surrender (638) to mortal futility, and the 'colossal Skeleton' (611) of *Lenore* and grim medieval tradition<sup>260</sup>: Thanatos revealed without her former flattering illusion.

Before Shelley's poet is reproached, however, for failing to recognise his dream siren in her true image, one can hardly overlook that the character Dante was aided in this recognition by Virgil: the exemplar of secular and social virtues.<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, he is aided on this occasion by a significantly 'Holy' lady. Not Beatrice – the true Uranian Aphrodite of the *Commedia* – but a representative of the dreamer's religious convictions nonetheless. These serve to 'alert' him to his imminent danger of deviating from the spiritual path and into self-deluding self-love. For

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<sup>259</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 51:

One may, like the cold realist, entertain no illusions; yet by the same token he cuts himself off from the enjoyment of life. The paradox is that the pursuit of phantoms is necessary to human happiness but inevitably productive of despair, while one who refuses to admit illusions to his thinking at the same time dries up the springs of joy in life. Shelley's preface to *Alastor* indicates that he would side with the missionary as against the cold calculator. The most quixotic dreamer is preferable, if he hurls himself at a vision with passionate intensity, to those who wither up in loveless lethargy.

Ironically, it seems that when one has determined that the illusion is a 'fantasm' of the ego, 'loveless lethargy' is essentially the condition of the isolated dreamer/ escapist. Also see Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 128-42 (p. 142):

There is no question here of the poet's solitude being a selfish moral choice receiving just requital. Moreover, this very image of violent Power will be affirmed in Shelley's later work as the very nature of poetic inspiration itself. Likewise, the destruction suffered by the hero of *Alastor* will become a necessary element of the poet's function.

<sup>260</sup> The same medieval depictions, in fact, which influenced Shelley's representations of Famine, Anarchy, and Life in *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, *The Mask of Anarchy*, and 'The Triumph of Life' respectively. Somewhat interestingly, the skeletal famine (described at the opening of Act II.ii, *Swellfoot the Tyrant*) is described as a 'Goddess'. If nothing else, this remarkable apparition does suggest Guthke's argument has either overlooked Shelley or consciously ignored such implicit, if graphic representations of Death.

<sup>261</sup> *Purgatory*, p. 123 (note to l. 35): '[...] the theological (Christian) graces of Faith, Hope, and Charity, [...] the good pagans did not know, though perfect in their practice of the four cardinal (natural) virtues of Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude [...].'

[...] an idealistic love which is not firmly related to its divine archetype is fraught with dangers, since it may lead to a destructive self-worship – a Narcissus-projection of our own ego upon the object of desire [...] There is no more insidious enemy of the true Beatrice than the false Beatrice [...] the false image turning for ever inwards in narrowing circles of egotism; the true working for ever outwards to embrace the Creator, and all creation.<sup>262</sup>

Dante's scheme condemns egotism in both its social and its religious aspects as the basic characteristic of all sin, symbolised in the dark and stagnant confines of Hell.<sup>263</sup> Shelley appropriates Dacre's horribly incongruous image of corpses making love (or at least decomposing together) in the grave to serve the same purpose. This is apparent from as early as his 1811 letter to Hogg to 'Invocation to Misery' in 1818/ 1819. Although 'Alastor' lacks such unequivocally Gothic imagery, the 'green recess' (625) the dying poet makes to enter – though presented as 'tranquil' (577) rather than necrotic (and bearing in mind that 'Alastor', by this point, has already demonstrated the corrosive effects of seductive, intellectual apathy) – is an ambiguous symbol. Gibson's optimistic interpretation of the 'silent nook' (572) is cast in some doubt by the apparent ultimate acceptance of solitude in the close confinement of the ego, and in Plato's terms the correct philosophical approach to a symbolic cave is to emerge from it – as in 'The Triumph of Life' – and seek neither to enter nor return except in order to better the conditions of other deluded, self-imprisoning cave-dwellers.<sup>264</sup>

<sup>262</sup> *Purgatory*, p. 44 (introduction).

<sup>263</sup> *Purgatory*, introduction pp. 9-71: 'Hell is the fleeing deeper into the iron-bound prison of the self [...]' (p. 16) 'It will be noted that, as in Hell, the warmer-hearted sins which involve exchange and reciprocity are at the top, and the cold egotism which rejects community is at the bottom.' (p.67)

<sup>264</sup> *Republic*, pp. 316-25 for Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the mass of humanity (the 'selfish, blind, [...] torpid, [...] unforeseeing multitudes') are shackled, their heads immovably turned from the daylight, watching the shadows of puppets cast by artificial light and assuming 'the shadows of these objects [...] [are] the whole truth.' (p. 318) Plato applies this analogy to society, its institutions and the popular – but wrong – conceptions supporting them. This lends a further significance to the spectral 'shadows of the Earth' in 'Invocation to Misery': 'All the wide world, beside us/ Shows like multitudinous/ Puppets passing from a scene' (61-3). Shelley's Gothic adaptation of the allegory impresses the warning that intercourse with these ego-engendered shadows risks reducing the human spirit to another shadowy irrelevancy. Similar issues and forces are clearly at work in 'Alastor'. So much the worse should the shadow be indistinguishable from the true ideal.

In fact, the poet does not seem to enter the cave, but pauses and expires on the threshold (625-71). Considered along with the general peace of the death-scene and his condition ('Hope and despair,/ The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear/ Marred his repose' (639-41)), and accepting Gibson's view that the 'two lessening points of light' (654) the poet sees in his final moments are the tips of the crescent moon and not the 'Two starry eyes' (490) of his fantasy,<sup>265</sup> there remains the possibility of final redemption. His quiet confidence – without need of hope nor occasion for despair – and the narrator's evident confidence in the poet's 'high and holy soul', its past glories remembered (628-9), suggests a return to true spirituality, guided by the spirit of nature he had previously rejected in favour of his personal succubus. In the absence of a truly viable and supportive society, nature may (or may have to) suffice if love is to escape the bounds of the ego and 'embrace the Creator, and all creation'.

Whilst society is viewed only sketchily in 'Alastor', what is revealed of it in the narrator's epilogue implies a world not dissimilar to the universally corrupt, bestial, 'vampire'-inhabited dystopia that is overthrown in *Prometheus Unbound*, Act III: 'Heartless things/ Are done and said i' the world, and many worms/ And beasts and men live on' (690-2). The placement of 'men' at the end of this somewhat unappealing list certainly has a satirical ring. Having witnessed Shelley's tendency to compare the worst of humanity to beasts, and considering that at no point does he apply this metaphor to the poet,<sup>266</sup> his sudden application of it to the mass of humanity renders it extremely doubtful that the overriding purpose of 'Alastor' is the condemnation of a single deluded egotist. The worms, noted as a favourite Shelleyan-Gothic signifier for decomposition (demonstrating the limits of materialism and thus the final, repugnant inheritance of the sensualist), are also men in this case. They 'Go to their graves like flowers or creeping worms' (622). Even

<sup>265</sup> *PP*, p. 567: '[...] a careful reading will show that they are the two points of "the divided frame of the vast meteor." (ll. 650-651).' If, on the other hand, they are in fact the 'Two starry eyes', the poet is as effectively consigned to oblivion as Dacre's Victoria, masochistically submitting to her wish-fulfilling illusion of Satan in her final moments (*Zofloya*, 266-7). I believe that the ambiguity of this image is intended.

<sup>266</sup> In point of fact, as the poet declares to the swan at l. 287-8 that he possesses a 'Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned/ To beauty', he rejects the bestial littleness of spirit that Shelley condemns in the epilogue and Preface of 'Alastor'.

though these human ‘worms’ subsist on death – the physical or spiritual oppression of others – they too must reap as they sow. The poet, at all events, is primarily a vampire unto himself.

It seems, however, from his ‘repose’ at the cave mouth (his intended grave), that he goes to his grave ‘like flowers’: he does not enter the traditional enclosed sepulchre of decay – the posthumous analogy of the self-consuming ego – and is last encountered ‘safe from the worm’s outrage’ (702) with the vague possibility (spiritually, at least) of remaining so. If, that is, he has truly succeeded in externalising his formerly self-consuming love upon nature – all that is available to him. Shelley would make a more hopeful statement on this subject in the 1818 essay ‘On Love’.<sup>267</sup> Within ‘Alastor’ and its Preface there is a great significance attached to human sympathy, and the inadequacy of nature to compensate for the deficiency of this is clearly stressed (192-205, 479-92), and only briefly and implicitly retracted at the poet’s death. This doubtful hope nevertheless mitigates an otherwise hopeless depiction of the human condition: society here is an entity better calculated to promote ‘heartless’ egotism than the natural virtues, and is certainly incapable of presenting the poet with a genuinely sympathetic lover. Deprived of a Virgil and a Beatrice, this descendant of Dante spends considerable time in the company of his siren, and may well die in it. But society, dominated by the maggot-like ‘unforeseeing multitudes’, has the greater need for reformation than the idealistic but ill-favoured poet.

Although it would be stretching a point to argue that the veiled maid is consciously portrayed as a vampire, she is at least of a type with the Romantic view of the vampire. As a siren – which she is certainly portrayed as – she occupies the same territory as Lamia, Christabel, Lord Ruthven, and her Dantean predecessor. Whereas fiction of the twentieth century would permit the vampire to become a figure of ambiguous horror and admiration (ironically, due in part to Polidori’s depiction of Ruthven as an undead Lord Byron), the Romantic figure is as unambiguous as the

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<sup>267</sup> *PP*, p. 474:

There is eloquence in the tongueless wind and a melody in the flowing of brooks and the rustling of reeds beside them which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul, awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes like the enthusiasm of patriotic success or the voice of one beloved singing to you alone.

Antichrist: a figure of entirely superficial attraction and, to those who succumb, inevitable destruction, either physically or spiritually. Shelley's single explicit reference to the contagiously destructive, self-loathing vampire, amidst the pseudo-Miltonic dimensions of *Prometheus Unbound*, may well suggest to us the figure of Milton's Satan, whom Shelley saw as the exemplar of superficial good qualities ('courage and majesty and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force') rendered futile and dangerous by the inner corruption of egotism and self-contempt: 'The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure,' in spite of his all-too obvious 'taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement.'<sup>268</sup> Shelley makes a similar statement on the character of Beatrice Cenci: 'It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification [...] that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.'<sup>269</sup> Faced with such pitiable, though spiritually dead characters, the human capacity for self-delusion ('pernicious casuistry') is so apt to rationalise or even to applaud their failings, they become potential 'vampires' to their apologists and admirers. Taken in this sense, the social 'vampire' need not be a dedicated sadist, sensualist, exploitative Pandemian lover, or suicidal misanthropist (although they often tend to these traits), but merely someone who has absorbed as the truth, and intends to propagate, a false ideology. This would become a particularly relevant issue in Shelley's long-term uncertainty concerning the character and works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as we shall see in chapter V, but is also of great significance in the male protagonist of Shelley's next major work following 'Alastor': *Laon and Cythna*, in which the Gothic element is as strong, and as political, as ever.

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<sup>268</sup> Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, PP, p. 133.

<sup>269</sup> Preface to *The Cenci*, PP, p. 240.



## IV

**‘Crimes of convention’:****Incest as Gothic reaction and spiritual revolution**

Whilst Shelley was accustomed to employ the devices of Gothic fiction throughout both his early and major works, in most instances the stock elements were implemented in order to develop their moral or allegorical significance – as inherited from earlier works – without essentially altering it. The Holy Inquisition of *The Cenci*, for example, which had typically been deployed as a symbol of Catholic sadism and hypocrisy,<sup>270</sup> continues to function as a disgrace on that particular institution, but is furthermore made representative of an ideological framework pervading all organised human relations. The readers of Lewis and Radcliffe could rest relatively easy in the security of living at a clearly-defined remove from the alien societies their authors depict, in which natural virtues are corrupted, after the fashion depicted in Rousseau’s *Émile*, and vices concealed and protected, by a perverted but unmistakably foreign theocracy. The nature of corruption in *The Cenci* is more fluid, and resists being defined as the monopoly of a single institution. Whether Count Cenci’s rampant egotism is a direct symptom of his misguided religious convictions, or whether the religious institution has been corrupted to serve the Pandemian interests of men such as Cenci is unanswerable; suffice to say that the resolution of *The Monk*, *The Italian* and *The*

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<sup>270</sup> See Ann Radcliffe’s anti-Catholic novel *The Italian* (1797) (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. II, chapter VI, pp. 192-207, and vol. III, chapter V, pp. 304-25 (p.203):

‘If you torture me till I acknowledge the justness of this accusation,’ said Vivaldi, ‘I must expire under your afflictions, for suffering shall never compel me to utter a falsehood. It is not truth, which you seek; it is not the guilty, whom you punish; the innocent, having no crimes to confess, are the victims of your cruelty, or, to escape from it, become criminal, and proclaim a lie.’

The theme persists a year later than *The Cenci* in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), vol. II, chapter XI, pp. 226-44 (p. 239):

I uttered one shriek of agony – the only *human* sound ever heard within the walls of the Inquisition. But I was borne away; and that cry into which I had thrown the whole strength of nature, was heeded no more than a cry from the torture room. On my return to my cell, I felt convinced the whole was a scheme of inquisitorial art, to involve me in self-accusation, (their constant object when they can effect it), and punish me for a crime, while I was guilty only of an extorted confession.

*Mysteries of Udolpho* – remove the man and you remove the problem – does not apply. ‘If all things then should be ... my father’s spirit/ [...] For was he not alone omnipotent/ On Earth, and ever present?’ (V. iv. 60-9) Shelley’s vision of institutional and inherent sado-masochism becomes too all-embracing to suggest the exemption of non-Catholics from the cautions of the ‘sad reality’. As Leigh Hunt confirms in declaring ‘We have thousands of Cencis among us in a lesser way,’ Shelley’s concern is with agents of corruption that are universal among humanity, facilitated to a greater or lesser degree by institutions and ethics: ‘[...] to make apparent some of the most dark and secret caverns of the human heart.’<sup>271</sup>

Shelley capitalises on the shock potential of breaking the incest taboo, as established by his Gothic predecessors and contemporaries. The theme thus retains a more or less conventional significance in *The Cenci*, graphically signifying Count Cenci’s irrevocable, self-willed descent into those ‘dark and secret caverns’. But Shelley’s depictions of incest go beyond the moral shock and despair of more conventional depictions, avoiding the arbitrary condemnation of the act without taking circumstances into account.<sup>272</sup> Under the correct circumstances, Shelley is able to conceive of a redeemed form of incest, although the positive aspect of his philosophy on this subject has been occasionally overstated:

[Nathaniel] Brown has cogently traced the source of the theme of incest in Shelley (where, between brother and sister, it is *always* portrayed approvingly), to the memory of ‘his own youthful engagement to his first cousin Harriet Grove, with whom he was nearly as intimate in childhood as he was with his own sisters [...].’<sup>273</sup>

<sup>271</sup> *The Cenci*, V. iv. 60-9, and the Preface (PP, p. 239).

<sup>272</sup> See Horace Walpole’s play *The Mysterious Mother*, V. i: The Countess of Narbonne reveals to her son, Edmund, that after the death of his father, she conceived a successful plan to covertly take the place of Edmund’s lover, after which incestuous liaison she gave birth to a daughter to whom Edmund has just been married. In spite of Edmund’s and the daughter’s complete innocence of these facts, the countess describes the latter as her ‘hell-born progeny’ (300) and the former as her ‘polluted son’ (371). Edmund himself collapses into despair and death-wishes: ‘[...] we must haste/ To where fell war assumes its ugliest form:/ I burn to rush on death!’ (402-4) Cited from *Five Romantic Plays*, ed. Michael Cordner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 58-61.

<sup>273</sup> *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 162.

Substitution of the term ‘approvingly’ for ‘sympathetically’ might more accurately suggest the complexity of the issues which Shelley links with incest: the concept of acute, even poetic, sensibility aiming for idealism and instead falling headlong into morbid narcissism continues to haunt Shelley beyond ‘Alastor’, and pervades his major conception of sibling incest in the early part of *Laon and Cythna*. A lesser and bleaker figurative example is clear in ‘Invocation to Misery’: ‘Misery! – we have known each other/ Like a sister and a brother’ (11-2). We have seen the graphically sexual and spiritually repulsive nature of this imagined relationship. As shall be seen, Shelley certainly makes of incest an expedient fantasy which incorporates the desire to reclaim the Eden of untroubled childhood, the desire to reunify the divided self after the fashion of Aristophanes’ myth, and extending from that, the desire to make of love a redeeming spiritual quest, and not a descent into sensual lethargy. This fantasy, however, he recognises (however unwillingly) to be of a similar nature to that of the ‘Alastor’ poet’s parasitic vision: not love for the true ideal, but a narcissistic sexual object choice. As with all forms of Pandemian sexuality, incest undertaken for patently incorrect or deluded intentions is disguised auto-erotism, but may be redeemed. Shelley allows this even in the case of a married sexual relationship, or he would hardly have undertaken two such relationships personally.<sup>274</sup> That process of spiritual development is as much the subject of *Laon and Cythna* as the political statement involved in the lovers’ denial of the ethical value of the incest taboo.

Both the vampire-myth and incest, as interpreted by Romantic authors, consistently stand as signifiers for the lowest depths of despair and sensuality to which the human psyche is capable of sinking. The close relation of these two themes is evident in their frequent proximity in the works of the period. Byron’s vampire of *The Giaour* is depicted as assaulting its erstwhile female relatives:

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<sup>274</sup> There are, admittedly, very few instances of happy conventional marriages actually related within Shelley’s works, and many that are patently disastrous (as in ‘Rosalind and Helen’, *The Cenci*, *Ginevra*, *Zastrozzi*, and *St. Irvyne*). Aside from the idealised depictions of his own marriages which preface *Queen Mab* and *Laon and Cythna*, the notable exceptions are very early: ‘Song: translated from the Italian’ in the *Victor and Cazire* collection, 1810 (depicting a happy peasant couple), and the prospective marriage of Eloise and Fitzestace in *St. Irvyne*.

‘daughter, sister, wife’; lingering particularly over the former prior to tearing ‘The tresses of her yellow hair’ and completing its lethal act of pseudo-rape in pure self-contempt. Matilda looks upon her father, in the depths of despair and unrequited incestuous lust, as a vampire. Lord Ruthven shadows the conventional Aubrey in the traditional manner of the *Doppelgänger*: the superhuman projection of the id, either facilitating the protagonist’s slide into degeneracy and megalomania (as in *The Monk*, *Zofloya*, and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*), or performing the requisite acts of sadism on his behalf, without any conscious request (as in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*). Having brought an abrupt end to Aubrey’s sentimental courting of the innocent Ianthe with the murder/ rape of the latter, Ruthven progresses to another implied subject of Aubrey’s repressed lust: his sister, whom Ruthven seduces, marries, and murders on the wedding-night. As if to reinforce Aubrey’s corrupt affinity with Ruthven, it is during this incident that Aubrey begins to prematurely ‘wither,’ and comes to resemble a vampire in his own right:

he left his house, roamed from street to street, anxious to fly that image which haunted him. His dress became neglected, and he wandered, as often exposed to the noon-day sun as to the mid-night damps. He was no longer to be recognized. [...] when he entered into a room, his haggard and suspicious looks were so striking, his inward shudderings so visible, that his sister was at last obliged to beg of him to abstain from seeking, for her sake, a society which affected him so strongly. [...] He had become emaciated, his eyes had attained a glassy lustre.<sup>275</sup>

The detail of Aubrey’s ‘glassy’ eyes reflects the ‘dead grey eye’ of Ruthven, which ‘did not seem to penetrate, and at one glance, to pierce through to the inward workings of the heart; but fell upon the cheek with a leaden ray that weighed upon the skin it could not pass.’<sup>276</sup> The ‘deadness’ of

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<sup>275</sup> *Vampyre*, pp. 63-5.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

the vampire becomes a metaphor for the spiritual isolation of the sensualist, unable to ‘penetrate’ (to enjoy any rapport with) the soul of his victim in his fixation on penetrating that victim’s body. The image of this roving eye seeking out an ‘object’ conveys an appropriately predatory, sub-human image, many years before fangs, pointed ears, excess hair and heightened senses became common currency in vampire fiction. It is, however, worth noting that both Coleridge and Keats chose to depict a vampire-like being as a serpentine entity (in *Christabel* and *Lamia* respectively). Whether purposefully – as in the case of Ruthven, or his close counterpart, the dedicated and malevolent seducer Ardolph in *Zofloya* – or inadvertently – as in the cases of *Lamia* and Matilda’s father – the sensualist is an egocentric destroyer, who achieves only physical ‘sustenance’ from the objects of her or his bestial desires, frequently corrupting them in the process.

At the beginning of *The Vampyre* both Ruthven and Aubrey are introduced into London social life, the former in his accustomed dual capacity as predator and tempter and the latter as a naïve, sentimental, and corruptible figure, inclined to view the decadent scene – including Ruthven – through rose-tinted glasses. Visualising the vampire – the embodiment of sensual degradation – as a heroic figure, Aubrey idealises the destructive capability within his aristocratic, patriarchal *droit du seigneur*.<sup>277</sup> His entry into maturity and society is thus marked by his implied attraction to the sexual corruption within society. As if to reinforce the point, as he sets out on the Grand Tour accompanied by his Pandemian doppelgänger, this institution is satirically described as having

been thought necessary to enable the young to take some rapid steps in the career of vice towards putting themselves upon an equality with the aged, and not allowing themselves to appear as if having fallen from the skies, whenever scandalous intrigues

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<sup>277</sup> See *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 1, p. 104. Aubrey is by no means unique as a sentimental protagonist ‘corrupted’ (albeit by implication) and destroyed by substituting the admiration of medieval/ Gothic values (of individual and hereditary honour, and emphasising physical prowess in men and physical purity in women) over modern values of social responsibility (or where society is itself deemed dysfunctional, philosophical values of similar import). Other victims of the same retrograde condition include Falkland in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* and Robin Oig in Walter Scott’s *The Two Drovers* (1827), both driven into a murderous vendetta after losing in a brawl; and Olivia Zastrozzi and Beatrice Cenci, who descend to similar extremes to avenge the violation of their ‘reputations’.

are mentioned as the subjects of pleantry or of praise, according to the degree of skill shewn in carrying them on.<sup>278</sup>

Amidst this degenerate context, seemingly designed to vitiate the young idealist, Aubrey's sister is depicted as the sole focus of spiritual sustenance.

Miss Aubrey had not that winning grace which gains the gaze and applause of the drawing-room assemblies. [...] Her blue eye was never lit up by the levity of the mind beneath. There was a melancholy charm about it which did not seem to arise from misfortune, but from some feeling within, that appeared to indicate a soul conscious of a brighter realm. [...] when her brother breathed to her his affection, and would in her presence forget those griefs she knew destroyed his rest, who would have exchanged her smile for that of the voluptuary?<sup>279</sup>

The narrator, or the observer (possibly Aubrey himself), appears to attempt the description of a spiritual, asexual being – the antithesis of the affected drawing-room ‘voluptuary’ – but the very statement of that antithesis (‘who would have exchanged [...]?’) signals that the idea of Miss Aubrey as a sexual partner remains in the mind of the beholder. The nature of the ‘affection’ between sister and brother is similarly ambiguous: ‘If she before, by her infantine caresses, had gained his affection, now that the woman began to appear, she was still more attaching as a companion’ (p. 58). Without further information (the narrator supplying none), the reader is left to surmise exactly why Miss Aubrey's purely physical maturity – her social introduction having not yet occurred – has increased her brother's attachment. Physical attraction is the inevitable conclusion.<sup>280</sup> Particularly when, at the novel's climax, Aubrey suffers a fatal haemorrhage at the

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<sup>278</sup> *Vampyre*, p. 32.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

<sup>280</sup> I am indebted to Patricia L Skarda for her study of incest in *The Vampyre*. See ‘Vampirism and Plagiarism: Byron's

news that Ruthven has ‘dishonoured’ (p. 71) his sister: his destruction either the result of being permanently deprived of his last idol of ‘purity,’ as his sister is absorbed into the sensual practices of fashionable society, or possibly the knowledge of having been responsible for her corruption. His complicity results not only from having, rather inexplicably, kept an oath not to disclose the nature of Lord Ruthven to his sister’s guardians, but also from their deadly affinity which this highlights: as already demonstrated in his lethal attacks upon the women whom Aubrey meets (and in the case of Ianthe, becomes clearly attracted to) during his tour. Ruthven acts as a romanticised avatar of the most sadistic depths of which ‘everyman’ socialite Aubrey is capable, and which are tacitly encouraged by the predatory sexual ethics of his own ‘civilised’ society, in which Ruthven is curiously as much at home as in the ‘primitive’ setting of rural Greece. Whilst the savage roots of egotism and injustice only find open acknowledgement in an apparently uncivilised ‘heart of darkness’ (Polidori’s Greek peasants are versed in vampire-lore, and can recognise Ruthven for what he is)<sup>281</sup> civilisation proves to be merely a veneer for the same malaise.

Polidori thus achieves much the same effect as Shelley in *The Cenci*, in which, by emphasising the universal complicity of supposedly civilised institutions (domestic, religious, and secular) in the most arbitrary acts of patriarchal injustice, Shelley places the Gothic in a context in which a reader of any ‘civilised’ society cannot summarily dismiss its implications. Furthermore, although Shelley’s play is more overt in this respect, the theme of incest carries a similar significance in both works (as it also does in *Matilda*), as an ultimate extreme in the spiritually destructive and self-destructive career of the pseudo-vampire. An extreme from which there is no

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Influence and Polidori’s Practice’, in *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 28 (1989), pp. 249-69 (pp. 257-9):

Just beneath the surface of this groundwork is the taboo of incest, for the horror resides in making love to his sister not in taking her life. In the fiction, the fact that the sister, Aubrey’s last possible companion, wants to marry the vampire heightens the frustration of Aubrey [...] By carefully building Aubrey’s rage and by cutting off all opportunities for its vent, Lord Ruthven vamps his primary victim: Aubrey. Aubrey, a vampire by infatuation and association with a man of his dreams is justified, then, in assuming responsibility for the deaths of both Ianthe and his sister. By satiating the vampire’s thirst with the lifeblood of young women, Polidori obscures the more significant and more subtly incestuous seduction and death of Aubrey.

<sup>281</sup> ‘She detailed to him the traditional appearance of these monsters, and his horror was increased by hearing a pretty accurate description of Lord Ruthven [...]’ (p. 42)

return, uniting sadism and narcissism with the transgression of ‘natural’ and religious laws,<sup>282</sup> in an act that sets the seal on the spiritual isolation and stagnation of its perpetrator.

In the case of Count Cenci’s inverted spirituality, this is of course a calculated transgression to establish its perpetrator as a sinner beyond the pale of common, and socially ‘acceptable’ venality: a crime which offends every component of the establishment, marking Cenci as a powerful outsider who answers to no master including God, who is only respected as an equal (or a reflection). Cenci underestimates the ability of society to bypass even a transgression of this magnitude: the incest taboo is so restrictive, and buttressed by the stigma of female sexual ‘impurity,’ as to render the crime inexpressible by its victim: ‘[...] her wrongs could not be told, not thought’ (*Cenci*, V. ii. 141).<sup>283</sup> Such horrors as ‘vampirism’ (signifying any passion with a morbid tendency) and incest are not to be acknowledged in civilised circles, regardless of their existence, lest those circles be undermined. The cultural super-ego may conceal and contain, but it cannot eliminate (and in these works, makes no apparent concerted effort to eliminate) the impulses of ‘Gothic’ savagery.

The incest taboo enforces itself in *The Vampyre*, with the protagonist spontaneously expiring

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<sup>282</sup> Derek Roper summarises the institutional responses to incest in society, in his introduction to *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, ed. Derek Roper (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 6-7:

Incest has been prohibited in almost all known societies from prehistoric times until quite lately [...] in Ford’s day incest could only be dealt with by the church courts; but secular arguments were used to support the religious ban. The ill effects produced by generations of close breeding were known and exaggerated. Incest was said to be so unnatural that even the nobler animals avoided it; it was believed that such unions would be sterile, or produce ‘monsters’, an idea latent in Hippolita’s curse (IV.i.97-100). [...] But the strongest secular argument was that in the prevailing discourse incest was seen as a challenge to the moral, social, and even political order. The rise of more authoritarian styles of government in Renaissance England brought with it an increased emphasis on the ideal of the family as both unit and image of the national hierarchy, held together by bonds of love and discipline and controlled by patriarchal authority. But sexual love, which should bind husband and wife together, could, if misplaced, be a strong force to disrupt the family; and incest was the most disruptive form of it, destroying ‘reverence’ by throwing all relationships into confusion.

<sup>283</sup> See Timothy Webb, ‘Naming I-t: Incest and Outrage in Shelley’, in *Shelley 1792-1992*, ed. James Hogg (New York: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1993), pp. 186-204 (p. 201):

Two of Shelley’s major works, *Laon and Cythna* and *The Cenci*, revolve around the fact of incest, yet in neither text is the word itself conceded explicit and formal utterance. Not to name the central “circumstance” as incest might easily create the suggestion of a Gothic horror which is unnameable, beyond the reach of civilized discourse [...] the silence of Beatrice is partly conditioned by the way in which language, no less than the legal code, is conditioned and constrained by the assumptions of a patriarchal order. (p. 201)



at the moment of revelation (i.e. that Aubrey's *Döppelgänger* 'id' has fulfilled his unnatural desire on his behalf, and with his tacit complicity). Similar retribution is meted out to both vampire and victim in *Die Braut von Korinth*, the vampire being ultimately revealed as the sister of the intended bride of Goethe's young Athenian, and thus (at least prospectively)<sup>284</sup> a prohibited partner under contemporary law.<sup>285</sup> The united taints of incest and vampirism represent the total failure of authority and religion to control or sublimate sexuality, and to hold in check those manifestations of it which threaten to disorganise human relations: the 'bride' – having been coerced into taking the veil by her mother – is symbolically 'revitalised' through sheer craving for the pleasures of which she was deprived, and thus claims (and kills) her sister's fiancé. The transgression wrecks the interests of both church and family. Similar wreckage results from incest in *The Monk*, destroying a family and exposing the inability of the religious and domestic institutions to suppress sexual desire and control its expression. The demands of chastity imposed upon Ambrosio by the church, and upon Antonia by Elvira,<sup>286</sup> in fact catalyse the potentially 'natural' sexuality of the former into sadism and the greater (albeit unconscious) perversion of incest, and leave the latter unable to recognise their onset, let alone prevent their fulfilment. The establishment makes an impossible demand of Ambrosio – absolute purity – and having fallen short of this, he heaps transgression upon transgression in the belief that he has nothing to lose in pursuing the opposite course to an extreme.

The combination of the quasi- and real incest themes produce an interesting amalgam in Ambrosio of awareness and unconsciousness of what he is doing. [...] he is exasperated into greater evil by his knowledge that he has betrayed and brought to

<sup>284</sup> Cf. Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1746) (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), in which the marriage of Conrad and Isabella – aborted by Conrad's death – proves sufficient for the accusation of his father Manfred's 'incestuous design' (p. 50) in attempting to pursue marriage with Isabella himself.

<sup>285</sup> *POS*, Vol. II. p. 47, n. S. s note:

The 'Table of Kindred and Affinity, Wherein Whosoever Are Related Are Forbidden In Scripture and Our Laws to Marry Together' that occupied the final page of *The Book of Common Prayer* enumerated the prohibitions, which included a man's wife's sister and a woman's sister's husband.

<sup>286</sup> Including the editing of sexual subject matter from her daughter's copy of the Bible (*The Monk*, p. 222-3 and n. 2): a matter of some controversy to Lewis' contemporary critics.

nought his own high standards of purity [promoted by his church, thus indicating the unrealistic demands of the cultural super-ego]. It is surely the beauty of that purity that he loves in Antonia but, driven on by lust aroused by the she-devil Matilda, he first tries to destroy Antonia's goodness by seducing her, then, when frustrated, destroys her. Incestuous rape, fratricide, and matricide – Lewis' choice of crimes emphasizes the unnaturalness of evil. Since these crimes are incestuous, moreover, the sense of self-destructiveness is enhanced.<sup>287</sup>

Aubrey thus unconsciously impels the degradation and destruction of his sister, and dies at the fulfilment of this: at least allegorically, in his 'better self,' since his dark psyche Ruthven evidently escapes. In similar vein, Lewis's Ambrosio alienates and destroys his single point of contact with true innocence and selflessness. The overall vision of Polidori, even in the mundane setting of *The Vampyre*, is somewhat bleaker, as the entry of the innocent Miss Aubrey into the 'killing air'<sup>288</sup> of upper-class society is a given from the moment of her introduction to the reader. Subjecting her to the attentions of his shadowing 'vampyre,' Aubrey symbolically anticipates her inevitable fall, and 'claims' his sister's person for himself. It avails him nothing, since the act of 'claiming' destroys the 'value' of the sexual object and the act of incest is too 'unnatural' to allow the hope of redemption. He sado-masochistically accelerates the process of his alienation from early innocence, and his progress towards advanced stages of sensuality and spiritual decay, and drags his sister in his wake. The events of the text unite them in physical death; the subtext in spiritual death.

It is testimony to Count Cenci's status as Shelley's most highly-developed Gothic character, that he follows the same pattern not only in awareness of its dire consequences, but with these consequences as his conscious aim. Like Aubrey, he aims at perpetual possession and control of his 'favourite' relation as a sexual object, and is evidently displeased at the thought of leaving her

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<sup>287</sup> Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 87.

<sup>288</sup> *Epipsychidion*, l. 262.

spiritual corruption to the care of a legitimate husband,<sup>289</sup> however degenerate the society she would be introduced to. Pressurised by the consciousness of impending death, and the need to complete his perverse, anarchistic masterpiece – a demonstration of the futility of accepted ethics – Cenci adopts a more drastic method to kill his daughter's spirit: attempting to instil in her the consciousness of complicity in incest, which would constitute a sure impulse to despair in one who fully subscribes to Biblical edicts,<sup>290</sup> as does Beatrice. In the aftermath, she learns to selectively pervert her creed for the sake of survival: for as far as she is concerned, it is better to be involved in parricide than incest. Although he does not foresee that result, Cenci does realise that when the act has been perpetrated, the inevitable distaste of a punitive patriarchal society will leave Beatrice with nowhere to turn for sanctuary: 'She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon/ Of public scorn', and even under the threat of certain death does not dare present the cause of her shame to the public opinion. Incest and annihilation (physical, spiritual, or both) go hand in hand in the Gothic tradition, and whilst the ethical systems these works depict can do little enough to prevent the act, their ways and means of punishing it are fail-safe.

MacAndrew describes similar themes at work within Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), involving the protagonist's conscious effort to suppress an incestuous passion and foster 'normal' human relationships. This is defeated by the inexorable nature of the incest-passion, which emerges stronger than ever from suppression. The incident she focuses upon is the 'quasi-sexual embrace which concludes this story of the last representatives of a possibly incestuous family':<sup>291</sup> Roderick Usher's twin sister is sealed into her vault in a death-like coma. Her brother comes to realise that she has been buried alive, but (for unspecified reasons) decides not to act. She eventually breaks out of the vault with unnatural strength, confronts her brother (as a wasted, bloodstained, vampire-like figure), falls upon him, and both die, whereupon 'The House of

<sup>289</sup> Cenci rejects such a course of action at IV. i. 21-30.

<sup>290</sup> The Lord's prohibitions against various incestuous acts (which will render the doers 'unclean' and anathema) are listed in Leviticus 18. 6-18.

<sup>291</sup> *Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, p. 198.

Usher' collapses upon them. A sober-minded friend summoned to attend upon the frail, disturbed Roderick Usher, can do nothing to avert the cataclysm.

[...] we may see Roderick's summons to his friend as an effort to muster the forces of normality and rationality, to bring to bear the values of an outside world in a final attempt to repress the incestuous impulse. The fact that those forces fail only makes the supposition stronger. The story is so ambiguous that it is not possible to decide whether Roderick is resisting his sister's incestuous desires or his own. [...] The impulse probably lies in both of them, since he has to struggle so to resist.<sup>292</sup>

Poe and others (Shelley in various works, Byron in *Manfred*, Lewis, and Polidori) present incest as a 'crime' which social convention is powerless to actually prevent, but automatically and reliably punishes through the pervasive taboo. One of the most frequently encountered patterns is that in which those who have committed or contemplated incest are consumed and destroyed, with varying degrees of rapidity, by their own guilt, and the conflict between guilt and desire. Roderick Usher and Matilda's father linger on in impenetrable introversion, till the one is destroyed by the trauma of a fulfilled forbidden passion, and the other by the despair of an impossible one.

Rosalind's half-brother expires after only a brief flash of insanity upon discovering – from the patriarchal, spectral figure of his father – why Rosalind and he cannot be married, notwithstanding their powerful attraction ('Rosalind and Helen', 276-305). In the latter case, however, it is by no means a given fact that the 'unnaturalness' of incest has itself been the active agent in introducing death to the formerly idyllic scene.<sup>293</sup>

From this point on, the story of Rosalind degenerates into a catalogue of deaths and despair,

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> This episode recalls the tragic climax of *The Mysterious Mother*, and Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), in which an incestuous romance between a couple innocent of the facts is averted by the knowledge of their sibling relationship. In Shelley's works, the innocence of the parties involved emphasises the arbitrary nature of the incest taboo: incest is only regarded as morally and spiritually damaging if the passion is conceived in malice or lust, though one must be acutely alert to the insidious development of such egotistic motives.

the deaths of her half-brother and of her parents (315-47) followed by that of her cruel and abusive husband (420-35). Her treatment at the hands of the latter leads Rosalind, at the birth of her first child, to consider ‘how hard it were/ To kill my babe’ (371-2), though ultimately she resists this temptation to emulate Goethe’s Margareta.<sup>294</sup> Her estranged marriage to this prematurely aged, vampire-like figure,<sup>295</sup> is itself a living death, which leaves her in the power of a dead man: her husband’s will – taking full advantage of his patriarchal prerogatives and society’s demand for female purity, or exclusion – accuses her of adultery, and forces her into exile and solitude as the price of her children’s inheritance (484-535). ‘[...] even the dead/ Have strength, their putrid shrouds within,/ To blast and torture.’ (459-61) This withered, rapacious, and quasi-undead agent of despair is undoubtedly the pseudo-vampire of ‘Rosalind and Helen’, and the fact that he is in no conventional sense involved, or involves his wife in ‘unnatural’ sexual practices, proves a singular diversion from the norm. We have observed the relationship between ‘vampire’ and victim in such examples as the works of Coleridge, Goethe, Lewis, Poe, Polidori, and Mary Shelley, in association with fornication, homosexuality (See *Christabel*, in which both ‘vampire’ and victim are women), rape, seduction, and very frequently with incest. In ‘Rosalind and Helen’, this mutually destructive relationship occurs within the bounds of a legitimate marriage. One can hardly avoid recalling an earlier and more explicit comment of Shelley’s on this institution: ‘A system could not well have been devised more studiously hostile to human happiness than marriage.’<sup>296</sup> The sexual relationship

<sup>294</sup> *Faust I*, translated by John R. Williams (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), 4507-10. That Rosalind should wish to murder her legitimate child implies that her socially-acceptable economically-motivated marriage is, at the very least, as great an abuse of sexuality as fornication or incest.

<sup>295</sup>

[...] He died:

I know not how: he was not old,  
 If age be numbered by its years:  
 But he was bowed and bent with fears,  
 Pale with the quenchless thirst of gold,  
 Which, like fierce fever, left him weak;  
 And his strait lip and bloated cheek  
 Were warped in spasms by hollow sneers;  
 And selfish cares with barren plough,  
 Not age, had lined his narrow brow,  
 And foul and cruel thoughts, which feed  
 Upon the withering life within,  
 Like vipers on some poisonous weed. (420-35)

<sup>296</sup> Note to *Queen Mab*, V. 189, p. 372.

endorsed by society is now branded as ‘unnatural’, whereas the illegal practice of incest is not given a chance to bear any bad fruit. Death is introduced to the scene by Rosalind’s father – the champion of patriarchal convention – who is a fit apparition for this purpose:

[...] my father came from a distant land,  
 And with a loud and fearful cry  
 Rushed between us suddenly.  
 I saw the stream of his thin grey hair,  
 I saw his lean and lifted hand,  
 And heard his words, – and live! Oh God!  
 Wherefore do I live? – ‘Hold, hold!’  
 He cried, – ‘I tell thee ’tis her brother!  
 Thy mother, boy, beneath the sod  
 Of yon churchyard rests in her shroud so cold:  
 I am now weak, and pale, and old:  
 We were once dear to one another,  
 I and that corpse! Thou art our child!’ (291-303)

The form of this remarkably morbid introduction comes close to a declaration of necrophilia (‘I and that corpse! Thou art our child!’). The precise circumstances of the old man’s relationship with this dead woman remain a mystery: presumably she is either his first wife or a late mistress, but since neither relationship could be considered as disreputable from the male point of view in a patriarchal society, it is clear that Shelley is assigning to a socially acceptable relationship the morbid imagery that would normally be projected upon the potentially incestuous relationship. Much the same effect is repeated when Rosalind depicts the corpse of her husband continuing to

exert a posthumous, malevolent force for her shame and ruin. Legitimate sexuality may provide a refuge from Gothic anarchy and exploitation in Radcliffe, and a more doubtful refuge in Lewis, but Shelley's version of the Gothic depicts a society so thoroughly infiltrated by the 'anarchs' that there can be no remaining refuge within its conventional bounds. On the contrary, the innocent (albeit incestuous) and sincere love between Rosalind and her half-brother is violently terminated by this deathlike avatar of convention, which subsequently involves Rosalind in a relationship which is legal, but alienating and exploitative.

In contrast, Shelley then presents the unmarried union of Helen and Lionel: certainly the most prosperous relationship within 'Rosalind and Helen', although it too is ultimately propelled to an untimely conclusion by the persecutions of 'The ministers of misrule' (857). Shelley is consistent in portraying the supposed guardians of civilisation as its fundamental enemies. 'The state of society in which we exist is a mixture of feudal savageness and imperfect civilisation'<sup>297</sup> he declares in 1812, reserving especial condemnation for Christian 'hostility to every worldly feeling', and continues to refer to tyrants as 'hoary anarchists' in 'The Triumph of Life' (237). In 'Rosalind and Helen', the most conspicuous among the 'anarchs' are still 'the priests of the bloody faith' (895) which Shelley had cited at considerable, and graphic length within the Note to *Queen Mab*.

The first Christian emperor made a law by which seduction was punished with death; if the female pleaded her own consent, she was also punished with death; if the parents endeavoured to screen the criminals, they were banished and their estates were confiscated; the slaves who might be accessory were burned alive, or forced to swallow melted lead. The very offspring of an illegal love were involved in the consequences of the sentence. – Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, etc., vol. ii, p. 210. See also, for the hatred of the primitive Christians to love and even marriage, p. 269.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., n. 1.

Images of Christian sadism figure prominently in Shelley's major works of this period, as evidenced by the incarceration of Lionel, the bloodthirsty Iberian priest of *Laon and Cythna*, and the priest-led lynch-mob which sets the scene of 'Rosalind and Helen', presaging both of the protagonists' doomed relationships: a brother and sister become romantically involved, though now fully intentionally, and in full awareness of the risks they run in so blatantly defying convention. That danger is almost instantly realised in the form of their brutal 'execution' at the hands of a mob and a clergyman:

[...] a sister and a brother  
 Had solemnized a monstrous curse,  
 Meeting in this fair solitude:  
 For beneath yon very sky,  
 Had they resigned to one another  
 Body and soul. The multitude,  
 Tracking them to the secret wood,  
 Tore limb from limb their innocent child,  
 And stabbed and trampled on its mother;  
 But the youth, for God's most holy grace,  
 A priest saved to burn in the market-place. (156-66)

One can hardly doubt that Shelley's sympathies are not with this particular multitude, who greatly resemble the mob of *The Monk* in their abuse and murder of the prioress. In this instance, as there, the scene is rendered even more distasteful by the overtones of gang rape.<sup>299</sup> It is also notable

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<sup>299</sup> Particularly with the detail of stabbing, the connotations of which can be observed throughout the more lurid examples of the Gothic genre.



that only the male youth's execution is accorded any ceremony, the woman and child being casually lynched: a typical demonstration of conventional ethics sparing no human consideration for 'fallen' women and illegitimate children.<sup>300</sup> The forces of conventional, patriarchal sexuality are gathered in a sadistic oppression of the anathematised, incestuous relationship, which represents a 'monstrous curse' against the system. Crook and Guiton go somewhat further in their interpretation of this passage:

Such a union is a revolutionary force, because the brother-sister partnership confronts Christianity (social anthropology in Shelley's day had discovered that brother-sister incest was not a universal taboo), and because it is inherently feminist. The 'monstrous curse', then, is a vow that the brother and sister have made to defeat tyranny, especially the tyranny of Christian sexual morality [...].<sup>301</sup>

Thus, in this brief and unpleasant episode, we encounter the foundations of Shelley's redemption of incest, or at least favourable comparison of incestuous lovers against the proponents of conventional sexuality. The moral authority of representatives such as the sadistic priesthood Shelley so frequently depicts – though most explicitly in *The Cenci*, where the sexual aspects of their corruption are most overt – is doubtful to say the least, and any edict such figures and institutions pronounce as a universal truth is subject to the same doubt. Without being able to find any inherent, superior good in the makers and enforcers of sexual ethics – whose brutally excessive justice implies repression rather than control of desires – any merely physical or socially conditioned revulsion to incest must bear close examination before the act is designated a crime.

Shelley's comments on the homosexuality of Plato's circle in 'A Discourse On the Manners of the

<sup>300</sup> *The Monk*, pp. 349-51, where the child of Agnes (conceived in her illicit tryst with Raymond) is contemptuously abandoned to starve to death by the prioress, with the prediction that 'begotten in perjury, incontinence, and pollution, it cannot fail to prove a prodigy of vice.' (349) The lack of legal rights accorded to illegitimate children remained of contemporary interest far later than Shelley's dates, as Wilkie Collins' novel *No Name* (1862) treats at length.

<sup>301</sup> *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, p. 162.

Antient Greeks...’ point to his conviction that the sexual ethics of his time were flawed, hypocritical, and enshrined arbitrary judgements:

The action by which this passion was expressed, taken in its grossest sense, is indeed sufficiently detestable. But a person must be blinded by superstition to conceive of it as more horrible than the usual intercourse endured by almost every youth of England with a diseased and insensible prostitute. It cannot be more unnatural, for nothing defeats and violates nature, or the purposes for which the sexual instincts are supposed to have existed, than prostitution. [...] Nothing is at the same time more melancholy and ludicrous than to observe that the inhabitants of one epoch[s] or of one nation[s], harden themselves to all amelioration of their own practices and institutions and soothe their constitutions by heaping violent invectives upon those of others; while in the eye of sane philosophy, their own are no less deserving of censure.<sup>302</sup>

Though his personal physical revulsion to consummated homosexual love is probably sincere (considering his frequently macabre depictions of physical sexuality) and fails any modern standard of political correctness, Shelley at least refuses to pass a conventional moral judgement and recognises that such prejudice is a displacement of society’s own sexual guilt upon a conspicuous ‘other.’ The cultural ego spares itself the need for punishment (for tolerating prostitution and the degeneracy of the young) by allowing the backlash of the cultural super-ego to descend upon excluded scapegoats, as Shelley had formerly protested in the Note to *Queen Mab*: ‘[...] society, forsooth, the pure and virtuous matron, who casts [the woman thus forced into prostitution] from her undefiled bosom! Society avenges herself on the criminals of her own creation.’ This last statement could serve as a synopsis for *The Cenci*, in which all the social circumstances conspire to drive Beatrice into a crime for which she is practically sacrificed to salve

<sup>302</sup> *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 412.

the collective conscience, and the same issues are reiterated in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna*, by way of justification for the inclusion of the notorious incest scene:<sup>303</sup>

It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. I have appealed therefore to the most universal of all feelings, and have endeavoured to strengthen the moral sense, by forbidding it to waste its energies in seeking to avoid actions which are only crimes of convention. It is because there is so great a multitude of artificial vices, that there are so few real virtues. Those feelings alone which are benevolent or malevolent, are essentially good or bad.<sup>304</sup>

‘Free love,’ homosexuality and incest are categorised by Shelley as ‘artificial vices’, designated crimes by social authorities, but acts in which there is nothing necessarily nor self-evidently ‘malevolent’ or ‘unnatural.’<sup>305</sup> Shelley’s scepticism concerning marriage, inherited from Wollstonecraft and Godwin,<sup>306</sup> is demonstrated in ‘Rosalind and Helen’, where the only conventionally legitimate relationship is a loveless, economically-motivated sham. Homosexuality, having been accepted practice in the classical civilisation which Shelley revered far above that of

<sup>303</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, Canto VI, 2596-685, in *POS*, pp. 169-72.

<sup>304</sup> Preface to *Laon and Cythna*, in *POS*, p. 47.

<sup>305</sup> Roper explores these themes in his introduction to *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, p. 6:

When Giovanni calls the concept of incest ‘a customary form, from man to man’ (I.i.25), he is reaching towards a truth. Incest is a social construction attached to a relatively unimportant biological fact. To many the very idea is repugnant, yet human beings have no inborn aversion from it.

<sup>306</sup> See Mark Philp’s edition of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol. 3, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993):

The abolition of marriage will be attended with no evils. We are apt to represent it to ourselves as the harbinger of brutal lust and depravity. But it really happens in this as in other cases, that the positive laws which are made to restrain our vices, irritate and multiply them. Not to say, that the same sentiments of justice and happiness which in a state of equal property [i.e. Free love] would destroy the relish of luxury, would decrease our inordinate appetites of every kind, and lead us universally to prefer the pleasures of intellect to the pleasures of sense. [...] It is a mark of the extreme depravity of our present habits, that we are inclined to suppose the sensual intercourse any wise material to the advantages arising from the purest affection. (p. 454)

the ‘licentious Romans’<sup>307</sup> (implying that the Romans’ sensuality – a genuine vice – was so anti-social as to degrade and destroy their civilisation), could hardly be believed by Shelley to be capable of engendering anti-social sentiments. As for incest, ‘the sceptical temper of the seventeenth century had begun to question whether ‘nature’ did always reinforce religion,<sup>308</sup> and Shelley’s attitude to the ethics of conventional religion and the integrity of its ministers was such as to enhance that scepticism. In doing so, he reaches much the same conclusion as Freud’s arguments concerning ‘The Barrier against Incest’ in the 1905 essay ‘The Transformations of Puberty’:

[...] by the postponing of sexual maturation, time has been gained in which the child can erect, among other restraints on sexuality, the barrier against incest, and can thus take up into himself the moral precepts which expressly exclude from his object-choice, as being blood-relations, the persons whom he has loved in his childhood.

Respect for this barrier is essentially a cultural demand made by society. Society must defend itself against the danger that the interests which it needs for the establishment of higher social units may be swallowed up by the family; and for this reason, in the case of every individual, but in particular of adolescent boys, it seeks by all possible means to loosen their connection with their family [...] (*On Sexuality*, p. 148)

Shelley’s assessment differs chiefly in his explicit premise that the society created and protected by such cultural demands, emphasising male autonomy, is inherently savage and anarchic, or at best creates order at the cost of human happiness. He depicts restrictive marriages and prostitution as the institutionalised forms of sexuality which safeguard this system.<sup>309</sup> Instead of

<sup>307</sup> *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 411.

<sup>308</sup> *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, introduction, pp. 6-7.

<sup>309</sup> Bonca elaborates on Shelley’s personal reasons for despising and distrusting institutionalised patriarchy in *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love* (p. 54):

An anecdote about the poet’s father recounted by Medwin does suggest [...] that the elder Shelley personified the libertine attitude toward sexual matters that Shelley despised as a feature of both the aristocracy and masculine arrogance. Timothy Shelley, Medwin reports, “was a disciple of Chesterfield

addressing the abuses thus tacitly encouraged, in the interests of patriarchal and aristocratic privileges, alternative forms of sexuality are arbitrarily condemned as ‘unnatural.’ By forestalling the creation of a society in which economic and judicial regard is paid to the female victims of rapists and seducers, and marriages are encouraged without regard to money and status, two purposes are served: the protection of the established order and the provision of an outlet for the self-contempt of the patriarchal ruling body.

The position Shelley deliberately assumes on the matter of incest, denying any specific interest in the practice itself,<sup>310</sup> is essentially neutral (though by implication, sympathetic, considering the unsympathetic portrayals of the champions of convention), non-judgemental, and a challenge to established, intolerant, and hypocritical sexual ethics. His justification of the incest portrayed in *Laon and Cythna* invites debate over the value of ‘outworn opinions’, whilst the device of incest itself ironically precludes all debate in the eyes of his contemporaries. It is testimony to the strength of the incest taboo that even Shelley’s friend and supporter Leigh Hunt feels compelled to gloss over this point whilst generally defending the morals of *Laon and Cythna*,<sup>311</sup> whereas the vituperative review of John Taylor Coleridge (*Quarterly Review*, April 1819; to which Hunt was responding) introduces the subject in order to climactically round off a satiric evaluation of Shelley’s moral system:

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and La Rouchefoucauld, reducing all politeness to forms, and moral virtue to expediency; as an instance of which, he once told his son ... that he would provide for as many natural children as he chose to get, but that he would never forgive his making a *mésalliance*” [...] This image of himself scattering his seed with a kind of gentlemanly largesse must have disturbed Shelley greatly, for he was already developing a deep distrust of (his own) masculine sexuality.

<sup>310</sup> See the footnote to Shelley’s statement on ‘crimes of convention’ in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna*: ‘The sentiments connected with and characteristic of this circumstance, have no personal reference to the writer’ (*POS*, p. 47).

<sup>311</sup> *The Examiner*, Oct 10, 1819. ‘The Quarterly Review, and *Revolt of Islam*’, in *Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. I, pp. 447-8:

Mr. Shelley has theories [...] with regard to the regulation of society, very different from those of the Quarterly Reviewers, and very like opinions which have been held by some of the greatest and best men, ancient and modern. And be it observed that all the greatest and best men who have ever attempted to alter the condition of sexual intercourse at *all* have been calumniated as profligates, the devout Milton not excepted. A man should undoubtedly carry these theories into practice with caution, as well as any other new ones, however good, which tend to hurt the artificial notions of virtue, before reasoning and education have prepared them. We differ with Mr. Shelley in some particulars of his theory, but we agree in all the spirit of it [...].

The existence of evil, physical and moral, is the grand problem of all philosophy; [...]  
 Mr. Shelley refers it to the faults of those civil institutions and religious creeds which  
 are designed to regulate the conduct of man here, and his hopes in a hereafter. [...]  
 According to him the earth is a boon garden needing little care or cultivation [...]  
 [Man's] business here is to enjoy himself, to abstain from no gratification, to repent of  
 no sin, hate no crime, but be wise, happy and free, with plenty of 'lawless love.' [...]  
 But kings have introduced war, legislators crime, priests sin; the dreadful consequences  
 have been that the earth has lost her fertility, the seasons their mildness, the air its  
 salubrity, man his freedom and happiness. We have become a foul-feeding carnivorous  
 race, are foolish enough to feel uncomfortable after the commission of sin; some of us  
 even go so far as to consider vice odious; and we all groan under a multiplied burden  
 of crimes *merely conventional*; among which Mr. Shelley specifies with great *sang*  
*froid* the commission of *incest!*<sup>312</sup>

This demonstrates clear misunderstandings and oversimplifications of Shelley's arguments, which differentiate sincere repentance (of which Shelley approves) from self-loathing (which he associates with egotism, despair and death), condemn purely sensual gratification, and far from advocating a state of 'natural anarchy,' link disorder and decadence with the ostensible forces of order and justice. Nevertheless, the reviewer protects his stance with the closing revelation that Shelley's system argues that the incest taboo is unnecessary: a revelation that evidently admits of no defence. John Taylor Coleridge moves on without expanding this point. It seems that if Shelley's philosophy incorporates a justification of incest, it cannot be worth consideration. The somewhat more balanced review of 'Rosalind and Helen' by John Gibson Lockhart (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, June 1819) shows similar dismay at Shelley's apparent fetish for portraying 'the

<sup>312</sup> *Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 772.

unnatural loves of brothers and sisters' in a context judged to be 'altogether gratuitous – and, as far as we can discover, illustrative of nothing.'<sup>313</sup>

Notwithstanding Shelley's explanation of the incest in *Laon and Cythna*, his choice of subject matter to illustrate his ethical arguments was so evidently repellent to his contemporaries, that his continuing non-condemnatory depictions of sibling incest suggest his choice of 'conventional crime' was not an arbitrary one.<sup>314</sup> For these sentiments survive beyond 'Rosalind and Helen', albeit in a less mundane form, as demonstrated by *Prometheus Unbound*, Act. IV:

*The Moon.*

Brother mine, calm wanderer,  
 Happy globe of land and air,  
 Some spirit is darted like a beam from thee,  
 Which penetrates my frozen frame,  
 And passes with the warmth of flame,  
 With love, and odour, and deep melody  
 Through me, through me!

Shelley's choice of an incestuous union for this act of cosmic restoration could simply

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<sup>313</sup> *Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. I, p. 110. In more general terms of sexual ethics, John Gibson Lockhart clearly allies himself with the establishment:

what lesson are we taught by this eclogue, Rosalind and Helen? Does Mr. Shelley mean to prove that marriage is an evil institution, because by it youth and beauty may be condemned to the palsied grasp of age, avarice and cruelty? [...] Does he mean to shew the wickedness of that law by which illegitimate children do not succeed to the paternal and hereditary estates of their father? The wickedness lay with Lionel and with Helen, who, aware of them all, indulged their own passion, in violation of such awful restraints – and gave life to innocent creatures for whom this world was in all probability to be a world of poverty, sorrow, and humiliation.

The suggestion that the key to virtue and happiness lies in adapting oneself to live by the rules of an inhumane ideology would clearly have been unacceptable to Shelley, whose 'support' of incest is at least partially motivated by his wider interest in undermining that ideology.

<sup>314</sup> There are, for example, no such positive depictions of explicitly homosexual relationships in Shelley's original works. Bonca draws attention to 'the subterranean homoeroticism that flows through both *Zastrozzi* and Shelley's second Gothic novel, *St. Irvyne*', (*Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 60) but in both cases the passions represented or implied are exclusively of the patriarchal, Pandemian nature that Shelley consistently condemns.

indicate that freedom from arbitrary strictures will lead to the restitution of a glorious natural order, but a less abstract contemporary statement prompts further examination. Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne, of November 16, 1819, referring to Amnon's rape of Tamar,<sup>315</sup> indicates that the moral significance of incest itself held more interest for Shelley than its artificial status as a 'crime of convention':

Incest is, like many other incorrect things, a very poetical circumstance. It may be the excess of love or hate. It may be the defiance of everything for the sake of another, which clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism; or it may be that cynical rage which, confounding the good and the bad in existing opinions, breaks through them for the purpose of rioting in selfishness and antipathy. Calderon, following the Jewish historians, has represented Amnon's action in the basest point of view – he is a prejudiced savage, acting what he abhors, and abhorring that which is the unwilling party to his crime.<sup>316</sup>

As with the Preface to *Laon and Cythna*, this falls short of asserting the actual existence of a beneficial form of incest. Recalling that the poet of 'Alastor' suffered from an unmistakably morbid 'excess/ of love' ('Alastor', 181-2), and examining the description here given of the first (not the 'basest') type of incest, Shelley offers an ambiguous assessment of incest even in its most benign character. The statement that incest sometimes 'clothes itself in the glory of the highest heroism' implies borrowed robes, suggesting that this 'defiance' of convention for the sake of love enjoys only the delusive appearance of heroism. Shelley does not automatically demonise incest, after the fashion of his Gothic predecessors and his literary moral detractors, but nor does he laud it as an

<sup>315</sup> Shelley refers to Calderon's *Los Cabellos de Absalón*. The original tale is related in II Samuel 13, and represents the act of incestuous rape, very much in the later style of Lewis, as the ultimate depth of degeneration, revolting even the perpetrator in the aftermath and causing dire retribution. In this case, war in King David's family, perhaps implying (as *Hamlet* later develops upon) that incest – an offence to the natural order – equally throws into confusion the order of the state.

<sup>316</sup> *Letters II*, p. 154.



innately virtuous practice. Biographical readings of this theme have stated that Shelley's clear interest in envisioning sibling incest stems from his own separation from his largely feminine family circle to the masculine environment of boarding school,<sup>317</sup> and his desire to reclaim that original state. Bonca's interpretation is particularly pertinent in enabling us to discern the source of Shelley's continued ambiguity on the subject:

[...] Shelley exploited the rather well-worn notion of feminine love and self-abnegation to create a variety of compelling heroines. These vibrant sister-spirits not only exemplify sympathy and loving self-sacrifice but also infuse their brother-lovers with their own womanly essence. Based on the poet's original band of sister-spirits, his Field Place coterie of cousin and sisters, these radiant figures help Shelley's heroes to defuse their own masculine, self-serving impulses [...] Shelley's male protagonists re-enter the feminine Eden that the poet himself lost [...].<sup>318</sup> (*Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 8)

The incestuous courtship of the Earth and the Moon in *Prometheus Unbound* supports the theory that Shelley saw a mythical, post-lapsarian analogy in the disintegration of his childhood circle. The supposed desire for an incestuous relationship can thus be seen as compatible with the ideas expressed in 'On Love,' in which Love – depicted as a redeeming force of empathy with humanity and nature – is created by and focused upon the figure of the ideal antitype: 'Not only the portrait of our external being, but an assemblage of the minutest particles of which our nature is

<sup>317</sup> This event is depicted in *Laon and Cythna* as a traumatic introduction to a corrupted world and the end of childhood innocence:

I do remember well the hour which burst  
 My spirit's sleep: a fresh May-dawn it was,  
 When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,  
 And wept, I knew not why; until there rose  
 From the near schoolroom, voices, that, alas!  
 Were but one echo from a world of woes—  
 The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes. (Dedication, III, 21-7)

<sup>318</sup> *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 8.

composed: a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness' (*PP*, p. 474). If Shelley's interpretation of Uranian love tends towards a purified version of the self, in both 'external' qualities and inner 'nature', and given his belief that the qualities of virtue and self-abnegation worth allying oneself with were (conventionally) feminine in nature,<sup>319</sup> the love of a spiritually wavering male protagonist for an idealised, sustaining sister is at all events a logical fantasy. It presents the vulnerable male pilgrim, beset as he is with the sexual temptations of patriarchy, with the prospect of a relationship enshrining spiritual mutuality without necessarily (assuming the revocation or non-recognition of 'crimes of convention') excluding sexuality. The sibling relationship thus becomes an expedient for fulfilling the conditions stated in 'Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks...' to prevent sexuality from becoming 'a diseased habit,' and moreover to prevent 'the instinctive sense' from assuming any great level of significance between genuinely sympathetic lovers. In principle, the asexual sympathy that would exist between a brother and sister before entering into a sexual relationship would prevent it from degenerating into Pandemian sensuality and alienation. Shelley's interest in the spiritual relations of siblings, but also his scepticism that sexuality could hope to be involved in such a redeeming state of unalloyed Platonic sympathy, is interestingly illustrated in this following recollection from Hogg's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Upon discovering a remote flower-garden, Shelley imagines it in the aspect of an earthly paradise tended by 'two tutelary nymphs' (p. 79), reasoning thus for his exclusively-

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<sup>319</sup> See *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, pp. 89-90:

Like many theorists of his own and of our day, Shelley credited women with "permeable" ego boundaries and a fluidity of identity that would enable them to dispense more readily than men with the notion of a discrete, rigidly defined self. In compelling heroes such as Laon, Prometheus, and the voluble speaker of *Epipsychidion* to mirror the femininity of their supposedly "second" selves, the poet distances his surrogates from (masculine) conceptions of personal autonomy, fixed gender, and static identity, from the principle of self that Shelley's dangerously virile, monomaniacal, and "self-closed" *Doppelgänger* embody.

Shelley's prioritising of conventionally feminine virtues is a marked, if predictable departure from the *Symposium* (pp. 46-7):

[...] the Heavenly Aphrodite to whom the other [Uranian] Love belongs for one thing has no female strain in her, but springs entirely from the male [...]. Hence those who are inspired by this Love are attracted towards the male sex, and value it as being naturally the stronger and more intelligent.

female choice:

‘the seclusion is too sweet, too holy, to be the theatre of ordinary love; the love of the sexes, however pure, still retains some taint of earthly grossness; we must not admit it within the sanctuary. [...] The love of a mother for her child is more refined; it is more disinterested, more spiritual: but’, he added, after some reflection, ‘the very existence of the child still connects it with the passion, which we have discarded [...] The love a sister bears towards a sister’, he exclaimed abruptly, and with an air of triumph, ‘is unexceptionable.’<sup>320</sup>

Shelley’s triumphant discovery of a partnership fit for this Edenic ‘sanctuary’ entirely excludes masculinity,<sup>321</sup> and furthermore purges every ‘taint of earthly grossness’: sexuality in any aspect. Whilst Shelley would soften his opinion in later years, as the ‘Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks...’ clearly demonstrates, his confidence in men’s ability to control or sublimate ‘the instinctive sense’ remains but slight right up to ‘The Triumph of Life’, where Shelley does not even exclude Plato, his erstwhile mentor on spiritual love, from its damning influence.<sup>322</sup> The ‘Discourse’ develops the idea that sexuality, provided it is not allowed to degenerate into sensuality, and provided it is treated as a relatively unimportant fact within an otherwise Platonic relationship, need not be entirely resisted. Shelley again condemns established ethics, deploring that such methods as are conventionally used to (supposedly) govern the sexual instinct – the anathematising of such ‘crimes of convention’ as female unchastity, homosexuality, and incest, and the assumption that legal marriage restricts sensuality – are ineffective, and avoid directly confronting the natural

<sup>320</sup> *Life of Shelley*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>321</sup> See *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, chapter 3, *passim*. Bonca pointedly asserts that in order to be granted entry to a Shelleyan paradise, a Shelleyan hero such as Laon or Prometheus must essentially be emasculated and re-cast as a passive, pseudo-feminine figure. This reading centres around Shelley’s desire to ‘re-create his feminine Eden, both in his writings and in his life’ (p. 97) and convincingly argues that Shelley detested the whole principle of masculinity for having isolated him from his beloved circle of female relatives.

<sup>322</sup> ‘The Triumph of Life’, 254-9.

inclination to sensuality which threatens to degrade any sexual relationship.<sup>323</sup> Brother-sister incest is not exempted from this scepticism, in spite of its apparent compatibility with such idealist sentiments as Shelley expresses and echoes in 'On Love,' which he recognises could also serve as a cloak 'of the highest heroism' for an unreformed or self-deluding brother-lover, disguising sensual desires and purposes with a façade of spirituality: a matter of great concern to Shelley, as *Epipsychidion* most definitively illustrates.

We may observe that presentations of incest, from Leviticus and through Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe, Fielding, 'Monk' Lewis, Radcliffe and Maturin, had been consistently demonised<sup>324</sup> with hardly a word spoken in its defence. A somewhat more ambiguous judgement, in many ways anticipating Shelley's opinions, may be found in John Ford's revenge tragedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, involving the incestuous union of brother and sister, Giovanni and Annabella. This is discovered by a priest, who, having terrorised Annabella with depictions of hell ('[...] there lies the wanton/ On racks of burning steel, whiles in his soul/ He feels the torment of his raging lust.' (III. vi. 16-23)), persuades her to marry the selfish and domineering Soranzo who almost kills her upon discovering her pregnant from her pre-marital affair, though unaware of the full scope of her transgression. Soranzo's hubristic commitment to his personal honour anticipates Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of the artificial, patriarchal 'divine right': 'Yet will not I forget what I should be,/ And what I am, a husband; in that name/ Is hid divinity.' (IV. iii. 135-7) A completely

<sup>323</sup> *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 410:

An enlightened philosophy, although it must condemn the laws by which an indulgence in the sexual instinct is usually regulated, suggests, however, the propriety of habits of chastity in like manner with those of temperance. It regards the senses as but a minute and subordinate portion of our complicated nature, and it deems the pleasures to be derived from their exercise such as are rather weakened, not enhanced, by repetition, especially if unassociated with some principle from which they may participate in permanency and excellence. Few characters are more degraded than that of an habitual libertine [...] The act itself is nothing.

<sup>324</sup> In the case of Milton, quite literally, as the father-daughter union of Satan and Sin illustrates (*Paradise Lost*, II, 727-814). It is perhaps illustrative of the general feeling against incest that it is this incestuous union which brings Death into the universe. One cannot overlook, however, the narcissistic motives of Satan, whose attraction to Sin is described thus by her: 'Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing/ Becam'st enamoured [...]' (764-5). This coincides well with Shelleyan concerns on love in general and incest in particular, since the latter is especially prone to accusations of narcissism. It also recalls the spiritual isolation of the souls in Dante's *Inferno*: the important fact is Satan's unmitigated self-love, which (as opposed to Christian or Platonic love) is incompatible with either good society or spiritual redemption.

unsympathetic character, and the epitome of a corrupt social order,<sup>325</sup> Soranzo spares Annabella out of no humane sentiments but in order to discover her lover and have his revenge upon both.

Giovanni evades this plot and murders his sister-lover, thus preserving his own exclusive sexual claim upon her: 'To save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss/ *Stabs her.*' (V. v. 84)

He then extracts her heart and brandishes it on the end of his dagger in his final, self-destructive scene (in which, at his pitch of despair, he publicly murders Soranzo and virtually invites his own subsequent revenge-killing). This symbol of feminine sensibility claimed, violently penetrated, and destroyed by the lifeless yet potent symbol of patriarchy could serve as a standard for such lovers as Ambrosio, Ruthven, and Count Cenci. This signal of Giovanni's complete acceptance of patriarchal principles – love as sexual possession and honour as power – does not straightforwardly condemn his incestuous relationship, in spite of its bloodthirsty conclusion. The murder enacted by Giovanni is no more than what the legitimately-married Soranzo had been planning. For Giovanni, however, it represents a catastrophic descent from the idealistic, pseudo-Platonic sentiments he has previously expressed in defence of his love:

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<sup>325</sup> There is much in Jacobean Revenge Tragedy's criticism of medieval, continental, and aristocratic moral values which anticipates the Gothic works of Radcliffe, Lewis, Maturin, and Poe. The corruption of both the aristocracy and the Catholic Church – virtual clichés of the Gothic genre, are depicted by Ford in Act III. ix of *'Tis Pity [...]*, when the Papal nuncio protects the nobleman Grimaldi from the secular authorities, who attempt to arrest him for the manslaughter of the middle-class character Bergetto (pp. 87-8). In the final scene, a cardinal summarily annexes 'all the gold and jewels, or whatsoever' of the tragically-slaughtered characters for 'the Pope's proper use.' (V. vi. 148-50, pp. 123-4) Ford's characters, not to mention characters such as Godwin's Falkland and Poe's narrator of 'The Cask of Amontillado,' hold true to the definition of 'honour' that caused Fielding to take a stand for linguistic moral integrity. Cf. *Jonathan Wild*, ed. David Nokes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 18-9 (introduction):

Fielding was particularly exercised by the abuses and corruptions of language, both by simple ignorance and, more insidiously, by the institutionalized euphemisms which assisted corrupt politicians to maintain themselves in power. His reading of Locke told him that abstract terms used without clarity and distinction ceased to have any meaning at all. This was particularly worrying in the case of those words of moral virtue – honour, virtue, truth, love, goodness, greatness, duty – upon which a civilized society depended, but which had no concrete referents in the material world. His works are full of examples of characters making euphemistic use of such terms to convert them from moral absolutes to social conveniences. In his *Covent Garden Journal* he provided a 'Modern Glossary' of the new meanings that such words had acquired in fashionable society: 'honour' = duelling; [...] 'worth' amounts to no more than 'power, rank, wealth', and 'wisdom', correspondingly, 'the art of acquiring all three'.

The Gothic authors and Romantic social critics (including Shelley, Wollstonecraft, and Godwin) remained alert to these corruptions, and the Gothic mode persisted throughout the period, and through Shelley's personal career, as a safe haven from which to condemn the enduring distortion of supposedly universal moral values.

*Annabella.* You are my brother, Giovanni.

*Giovanni.* You

My sister, Annabella; I know this;

And could afford you instance why to love

So much the more for this; to which intent

Wise nature first in your creation meant

To make you mine; else 't had been sin and foul

To share one beauty to a double soul. (I. ii. 233-9)

*Giovanni.* My sister's beauty, being rarely fair,

Is rarely virtuous; chiefly in her love,

And chiefly in that love, her love to me.

If hers to me, then so is mine to her;

Since in like causes are effects alike. (II. v. 22-6)

In Shelleyan terms, Giovanni depicts the union of spiritual type and antitype, arguing that physical likeness and attraction are the precursors of destined spiritual attachments, and thus should not be resisted. A synthesis of ideas from the *Symposium* – the division of the primitive humans and the ascent to absolute beauty – Giovanni's arguments contain a core of idealism which Ford and Shelley may well have sympathised with. The response of the Friar, however, even in spite of his rigidly conventional Catholic ideology, contains the core of Shelley's sceptical 1819 appraisal of incest, enacted in willing 'selfishness and antipathy' or not:

*Friar.* [...] if we were sure there were no deity,

Nor heaven nor hell, then to be led alone

By nature's light – as were philosophers  
 Of elder times – might instance some defence.  
 But 'tis not so. Then, madman, thou wilt find  
 That nature is in heaven's positions blind. (II. v. 29-34)

Aside from the implied criticism of Plato (which Shelley would doubtless not have appreciated), the Friar's belief that the guidance of nature is insufficient to justify aspirations of immortality would have rung true with those Romantic moral reformers who thought best to dissociate themselves from the ideas of Rousseau, the Enlightenment's champion of nature.<sup>326</sup> Nature in the works of Shelley is an ambiguous resource at best, as demonstrated in the solitary life and death of the somewhat Rousseau-like 'Alastor' poet, which leaves the question of immortality in considerable doubt. The considerable advice Shelley gives in the 'Discourse' in favour of temperance and sublimation of the sexual act (notwithstanding his professed desire to abolish arbitrary prohibitions on particular sexual acts) does not rest at all easily with the concept of any natural, unconsidered guiding principle. Nature and humanity are salvaged from corruption in unison in Act III of *Prometheus Unbound*, further indicating that the former holds no redemption for the latter. The redeeming love which enacts this restoration is a highly refined and sublimated sentiment, possible only when the male lover has passed through a personal purgatory, revealing to him the destructive, Pandemian essence of his instinctive inclinations. Uranian love only becomes attainable in a state of self-awareness, lest spiritual pursuits become merely a veneer for the pursuit of 'The act itself'. Such is the nature of the tragedy in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, as Giovanni and

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<sup>326</sup> See Wollstonecraft on Rousseau in *Rights of Woman*, p. 83:

Reared on a false hypothesis, [Rousseau's] arguments in favour of a state of nature are plausible, but unsound. [...] for to assert that a state of nature is preferable to civilization, in all its possible perfection, is, in other words, to arraign supreme wisdom [...] How could that energetic advocate for immortality have argued so inconsistently? Had mankind remained for ever in the brutal state of nature, which even his magic pen cannot paint as a state in which a single virtue took root, it would have been clear, though not to the sensitive unreflecting wanderer, that man was born to run the circle of life and death, and adorn God's garden for some purpose which could not easily be reconciled with His attributes.

Annabella renege on their professed ideals: she takes fright and retreats into convention, suggesting a tenuous former conviction in the innate virtue of their incestuous relationship. Giovanni's descent, culminating in a sadistic honour-killing, mutilation, murder, despair, and virtual suicide, affords a more dramatic example of the corrosive effects of placing faith in the spiritual probity of nature. An unpleasant aspect of nature is reflected in the 'feudal savageness' of 'imperfect civilisation'.<sup>327</sup> Nature is only a sympathetic companion (and even then of uncertain value) to the true Platonic lover, in the committed pursuit of the ideal, with which self-deception is incompatible. Well may Ford's friar ask of Giovanni 'Hast thou left the schools/ Of knowledge, to converse with lust and death?/ For death waits on thy lust' (I. i. 57-9).

Shelley first deals with a similar figure in 'Alastor': the would-be idealism of the wanderer is overshadowed and eventually consumed by his lack of spiritual vision or self-knowledge. The male version of this key Shelleyan figure (the female version being Beatrice Cenci) is typically a Dantean pilgrim-lover deprived of the sight of his Beatrice or wilfully rejecting her guidance in a moment of patriarchal relapse. In 'Alastor' Shelley chose to strand that figure on Mount Purgatory, but in *Laon and Cythna* the poet proceeds to his full redemption. The moral shortcomings of Shelley's poet-hero-narrator have been acutely described by Bonca:

As the less perfect of the sibling revolutionaries who star in Shelley's sprawling epic,

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 84:

[...] next to a state of nature, Rousseau celebrates barbarism, and [...] he forgets that, in conquering the world, the Romans never dreamed of establishing their own liberty on a firm basis, or of extending the reign of virtue. Eager to support his system, he stigmatizes, as vicious, every effort of genius, and, uttering the apotheosis of savage virtues, he exalts those to demi-gods, who were scarcely human – the brutal Spartans who, in defiance of justice and gratitude, sacrificed, in cold blood, the slaves who had shown themselves heroes to rescue their oppressors.

Shelley uses the Gothic, with its tempestuous depictions of nature and equally hostile, unsympathetic characters to illustrate the same point, far from advocating a return to a more 'natural' way of life: if anything, humanity is nowhere near civilised enough, but must drastically re-assess its conventions of what is civilised practice and what is savage or criminal. Cf. the opening paragraph of *St. Irvyne*, in which the isolated, despairing Wolfstein is located in a 'horrible and tempestuous' Alpine solitude (ZSI, p. 109), and *The Cenci*, III. i. 243-65, describing a hellish natural chasm which becomes a clear symbol of Beatrice's despairing belief in the inevitability of corruption and damnation.



Laon is more demon-haunted than his heroic sister. [...] A zealous champion of “love’s benignant laws,” Laon nonetheless capitulates to the principle of Self by casting those closest to him as “second selves” who hover in the background of his own personal drama [...]. As an idealized yet subtly ironized self-portrait, Laon enables the poet imaginatively to enact such fantasies as charismatic leadership, sibling incest, and glorious martyrdom while exposing and chastening the egotism inherent in these facets of Shelleyan love.<sup>328</sup>

The second canto of *Laon and Cythna* presents us with a problematic revolutionary figure, whose dedication to the overthrow of tyranny is ironically offset by his Satanic flights of egotism.<sup>329</sup> His narcissism goes beyond the appropriation of his sister as a ‘shadow’ (II, 875) and a ‘second self’ (876),<sup>330</sup> though this itself is sufficient indication of the limits of his astuteness and true commitment

<sup>328</sup> *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 67.

<sup>329</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, II, 775-92:

[...] too long,  
Sons of the glorious dead, have ye lain bound  
In darkness and in ruin! – Hope is strong,  
Justice and truth their wingèd child have found!  
Awake! Arise! Until the mighty sound  
Of your career shall scatter in its gust  
The thrones of the oppressor, [...]

[...] I will arise and waken  
The multitude, and like a sulphurous hill,  
Which on a sudden from its snows has shaken  
The swoon of ages, it shall burst and fill  
The world with cleansing fire: it must, it will –  
It may not be restrained! – and who shall stand  
Amid the rocking earthquake steadfast still,  
But Laon? On high Freedom’s desert land  
A tower whose marble walls the leaguèd storms withstand!

Cf. *Paradise Lost*, I, 330. Satan’s words to the fallen host: ‘Awake, arise, or be for ever fall’n.’ Laon’s tirade bears the suspicious ‘taints of ambition, [...] revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement’ which induced Shelley to exalt Prometheus as a hero over Milton’s Satan.

<sup>330</sup> Laon presents his revolutionary poetry as the product of a grotesquely militant version of the Wordsworthian ‘egotistic sublime’. *Laon and Cythna*, II, 928-34:

[...] my song  
Peopled with thoughts the boundless universe,  
A mighty congregation, which were strong  
Where’er they trod the darkness, to disperse

to equality. Responding to Cythna's lament that 'grace and power were thrown as food/ To the hyaena lust, who, among graves,/ Over his loathed meal, laughing in agony, raves' (988-90), he declares that this bestial presence of lust will never be exorcised 'Till free and equal man and woman greet/ Domestic peace' (995-6). In the same canto, Laon clearly falls short of this ideal: whilst enthusiastically praising Cythna's inclination to sing Laon's own 'impassioned songs' (922) back at him, thus flattering his tortured ego with a sense of purpose (910-27), he appears cheerfully condescending of her own, less self-aggrandising, more self-aware sense of revolutionary purpose.<sup>331</sup> In Canto III (1153-97) Laon blatantly ignores Cythna's pleas for passive resistance, and pointlessly attacks and kills three of Othman's soldiers sent to capture her for the tyrant's seraglio. After this fall from a dubious grace, he is ironically forced into recognising the degrading resemblance between himself and the aforementioned, ghoulish 'hyaena lust': stripped and manacled upon a stone column by the soldiers (III, 1207-33), Laon falls into a despairing delirium and dreams that four corpses are hung upon his prison-platform. The three 'Swarthy' (1328) ones are most likely the soldiers he killed, whilst the 'woman's shape, now lank and cold and blue,/ The dwelling of the many-coloured worm' (1333-4) is evidently that of Cythna. Starving and undeterred by her revolting condition, Laon takes a bite only to recognise his sister rather too late, at which point she imaginatively transmutes into a semi-living, mocking apparition: 'it seemed that Cythna's ghost/ Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm/ Within my teeth!' (1338-40)

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The cloud of that unutterable curse  
Which clings upon mankind: – all things became  
Slaves to my holy and heroic verse,

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 998-1009:

This slavery must be broken' [...]

She replied earnestly: – 'It shall be mine,  
This task mine, Laon! – thou hast much to gain;  
Nor wilt thou at poor Cythna's pride repine,  
If she should lead a happy female train  
To meet thee over the rejoicing plain,  
When myriads at thy call shall throng around  
The Golden city.' [...]

I smiled, and spake not.

A similarly graphic analogy between male lust and cannibalism occurs in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, vol. II, chapter IX (pp. 204-14), where a pair of lovers discovered in a convent are starved to death in a dungeon. The man falls into despair, expresses abhorrence of his erstwhile lover (who remains charitably passive), then attempts to eat her shoulder. '[...] that bosom on which he had so often luxuriated, became a meal to him now.' (213) He repents at the last minute, and dies while gnawing his own hand. Depicted in this fashion, cannibalism bears close similarities with Romantic depictions of vampirism: the self-absorbed, appetite-driven bestiality of the Pandemian lover, the objectification of the victim-lover, and the mutual destruction and degradation of both that this corrupted passion threatens.<sup>332</sup> Such corruption, infectious, predatory, and always sexually charged, is prevalent throughout the world of *Laon and Cythna*, as Laon makes clear at the outset of his narrative: 'all vied/ In evil, slave and despot; fear with lust/ Strange fellowship through mutual hate had tied,/ Like two dark serpents tangled in the dust,/ Which on the paths of men their mingling poison thrust'<sup>333</sup> (II, 698-702). Poison, semen, and the human spirit are confounded in the type of imagery that will become positively commonplace in the even more hopeless world of *The Cenci*.

<sup>332</sup> William A Ulmer, *Shelleyan Eros: The Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 60-1:

Laon's embrace signifies desire as violence. In Freudian theory, cannibalism usually connotes an urge for sexual incorporation typical of the initial, oral stage of psychosexual development, a stage quite commonly characterized by a "fusion of libido and aggressiveness" [...] Laon embraces his own violence as the price of possessing Cythna. [...] His necrophagic dream brazenly displays the affinity of eros and death. Yet it also accepts the presence of images of male aggression as a precondition for sexual enjoyment of the woman.

Bonca interprets this scene more positively. The grotesque, graveyard-Gothic imagery inclines me to believe, however, that Shelley intended this episode principally as a scathing criticism of the 'heroic' Laon's hypocritical ethics. *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 112:

By ingesting Cythna's flesh, Laon takes communion at a new altar, where woman and Christ – or woman as Christ – reign supreme. When Cythna's "cold and blue" flesh becomes warm in Laon's mouth, he is, in effect, reviving his absent/ dead sister, or, rather, he is resurrecting her spirit within him. Now Laon is ready to begin his journey back to his beloved [...]

<sup>333</sup> This image is repeated at X, 4076-8, in reference to the character of the 'Christian Priest' (4072) who proves to be Othman's most enthusiastically sadistic deputy. That the 'serpents', representing the sado-masochistic core of *Laon and Cythna*'s multiple atrocities are found most conspicuously focused in a figure alien to that society, yet familiar in the context of early Nineteenth-Century Europe, could well have served to answer John Taylor Coleridge's query concerning how Shelley's tale of 'Mohammedan' society could be relevant to 'Englishmen, Christians, free, and independent' (*Romanticism Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 773). Although Shelley chooses to take advantage of the international 'othering' technique so familiar in Gothic literature, in *Laon and Cythna* he is at pains to deny the possibility of exoneration to all representatives of conventional ethics.

This emblem of Pandemian sexuality sharing and spreading corruption far and wide is thus placed in contrast, yet with disturbingly similar overtones, with the beneficial union later consummated between Cythna and the chastened, humbled Laon:

[...] I felt the blood that burned  
 Within her frame, mingle with mine, and fall  
 Around my heart like fire; and over all  
 A mist was spread, the sickness of a deep  
 And speechless swoon of joy, as might befall  
 Two disunited spirits when they leap  
 In union from this earth's obscure and fading sleep. (VI, 2634-40)

The very immortality of Laon and Cythna (whom the poet-narrator encounters as spirits in Canto I) confirms that this union is indeed the physical expression of Uranian love, and not the disingenuous attribution of spiritual motives and qualities to a basically sensual experience. Nevertheless, however this may have developed from the false idealism of 'Alastor', the continued persistence of the pleasure and 'sickness' juxtaposition from the Pandemian world of *Zastrozzi* (cf. 'Alastor', 181-2) sounds an inauspicious note. Even within the poem itself, it invites comparison with some of Shelley's most graphically repulsive depictions of corrupted sexuality, or sexualised corruption. The spreading, 'mingling poison' of the serpents for one, and Laon's second pseudo-sexual encounter with a decaying female figure: the self-appointed vampire 'Pestilence' (VI, 2758-805). This madwoman – '[...] withered from a likeness of aught human/ Into a fiend, by some strange misery' (2760-1) and believing that she carries the plague which later decimates Islam – attempts to infect Laon with a forcible kiss. The symbolic rape of his first necrophiliac encounter is reversed; Laon becoming the victim of the ghoulish figure of lust as Cythna had likewise endured in

Othman's seraglio. In this latter case, the hardened sensualist is subjected to a vision of hideous self-realisation similar to Laon's nightmare:

She told me what a loathsome agony  
 Is that when selfishness mocks love's delight,  
 Foul as in dream's most fearful imagery  
 To dally with the mowing dead – that night  
 All torture, fear, or horror made seem light  
 Which the soul dreams or knows, and when the day  
 Shone on her awful frenzy, from the sight  
 Where like a Spirit in fleshly chains she lay  
 Struggling, aghast and pale the Tyrant fled away. (VII, 2875-83)

Although Othman quickly reverts to type, and has Cythna imprisoned in a cave<sup>334</sup> (VII, 2911-46), the revelation of the death-work inherent in his sensuality causes him to briefly revolt, as Laon had done before. The close parallel is no strong argument in Laon's favour, concerning his character and ideals before the cataclysm of Canto III. The diminishing of his potentially tyrannical, patriarchal egotism is symbolised by his later, passively victimised stance, accompanied with the Christ-like ability to forgive and pity his 'ravisher' (Laon invites 'Pestilence' to accompany him to the relative safety of the wilderness, but she refuses. VI, 2803-5). Laon's redemption lies entirely in emulation of Cythna, even to the most apparently degrading details, although these would become unimportant with the disregarding of patriarchal convention since 'no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another'.<sup>335</sup>

<sup>334</sup> The spell of delirium Cythna suffers in this imprisonment causes her to experience a vision of potential cannibalism, which she significantly does not fulfil: '[...] the sea-eagle looked a fiend, who bore/ Thy mangled limbs for food!' (2961-2) Cythna envisages a world attempting to violently pressure her into taking part in its corruption, by invoking both despair and appetite (the twin serpents 'fear' and 'lust'), but successfully resists (whereas Laon succumbs and is later reformed).

<sup>335</sup> Shelley's difficulty in communicating even this apparently self-evident (though anti-patriarchal) maxim is

Whether or not the nature of the intercourse between Laon and Cythna signifies the awakening of true, spiritually regenerative empathy in Laon,<sup>336</sup> the regeneration is certainly not extended to the world at large. Cannibalism and Pandemian sexuality remain in close and widespread association in the disastrous backlash of Cythna's abortive revolution of love:

There was no corn – in the wide market-place  
 All loathliest things, even human flesh, was sold;  
 They weighed it in small scales – and many a face  
 Was fixed in eager horror then: his gold  
 The miser brought, the tender maid, grown bold  
 Through hunger, bared her scorned charms in vain; (X, 3955-60)

In a scene of grotesque Gothic depravities worthy of Gillray's satirical cartoons on the French Revolution<sup>337</sup> (the event serving as the political basis of *Laon and Cythna*), Shelley depicts

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illustrated in the sardonic response of John Taylor Coleridge to *Laon and Cythna*, with emphasis upon the consequences of the brutal rape of Cythna: '[...] how the monarch himself, who had been a slave to her beauty, and to whom this model of purity and virtue *had borne a child*, was able to resist the spell of her voice, Mr. Shelley leaves his readers to find out for themselves' (*Romantics Reviewed*, part C, vol. II, p. 774).

<sup>336</sup> Which is likely, but in view of the persistently questioning tone of the narrative, still somewhat uncertain. VI, 2641-50:

Was it one moment that confounded thus  
 All thought, all sense, all feeling, into one  
 Unutterable power, which shielded us  
 Even from our own cold looks, when we had gone  
 Into a wide and wild oblivion  
 Of tumult and of tenderness? [...]

I know not.

<sup>337</sup> John Brewer, *The English Satirical Print 1600-1832: The Common People and Politics 1750-1790s* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey Ltd, 1986), pp. 248-9, plate 99: *Un petit Souper a la Parisienne; - or - a family of Sans-Culotts refreshing after the fatigues of the day*. By James Gillray, 20 September 1792. This cartoon depicts a family of French republicans as monstrous, vampire-like beings, consuming various dismembered human parts, including those of children. The connection between cannibalism and lust is implied in the accompanying verse, :

Here as you see and as 'tis known,  
 Frenchmen mere Cannibals are grown,  
 On Maigre Days each had his Dish,  
 Of Soup, or Sallad, Eggs, or Fish;  
 But now 'tis human flesh they gnaw  
 And ev'ry Day is Mardi Gras.

the mass of humanity as bestial, necessity-driven vampires. It should be noted that Shelley's stance is more sympathetic than Gillray's, notwithstanding his adoption of very similar Gothic imagery to depict the anarchy attendant upon the failure of a revolution.<sup>338</sup> Whereas Gillray and the Anti-Jacobin press were opposed to the Revolution on principle, Shelley's opposition is based solely upon the lack of readiness of the oppressed French people to carry out such a constitutional upheaval, and he stresses the need for people to be educated in the enlightened principles that would make such changes viable:

#### The revulsion occasioned by the atrocities of the demagogues and the re-establishment

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The reference to 'Mardi Gras' conveys the idea of a perverted festival or orgy, possibly with intentional reference to the pre-Christian fertility cult significance of Shrove Tuesday. Shelley most famously depicts such a scene in 'The Triumph of Life'. Also Cf. Peter J Kitson, "'The Eucharist of Hell'; or, Eating People is Right: Romantic Representations of Cannibalism", *Romanticism on the Net*, 17 (February 2000) <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/17cannibalism.html>> [accessed 10 October 2002].

<sup>338</sup> Shelley, as we have noted in his 1812 communications with Godwin, was at one point sceptical of the Gothic genre as a mode for any serious purposes, and that view endured beyond his death in William Hazlitt's review of Shelley's *Posthumous Poems* (1824) for the *Edinburgh Review*, July 1824. Cited from *Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. James E. Barcus (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 335-42:

Mr Shelley's style is to poetry what astrology is to natural science [...] Instead of giving a language to thought, or lending the heart a tongue, he utters dark sayings, and deals in allegories and riddles. [...] 'The Witch of Atlas,' the 'Triumph of Life,' and 'Marianne's Dream,' are rhapsodies or allegories of this description; full of fancy and of fire, with glowing allusions and wild machinery, but which it is difficult to read through, from the disjointedness of the materials, the incongruous metaphors and violent transitions, and of which, after reading them through, it is impossible, in most instances, to guess the drift or the moral. They abound in horrible imaginings, like records of a ghastly dream [...].

Hazlitt's description inadvertently summarises the lurid devices, allusions, physical violence, startling incongruities, and grotesque, nightmarish atmosphere of Gillray's works; especially during the 1790s. Cf. *Fashionable Contrasts – Caricatures by James Gillray*, introduced & annotated by Draper Hill (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1966), plates 25 and 26: 'The Apotheosis of Hoche,' 11 January 1798. This cartoon depicts the Revolutionary general Lazare Hoche (d. 1797) ascending into 'Heaven'. Upon closer inspection, and in spite of Hoche's serene countenance, a hangman's noose is directly poised to intercept his ascent. The 'harp' he appears to be playing also turns out to be a small guillotine, and a brace of pistols are thrust into his Grecian tunic. The heavenly host are half composed of decapitated figures, representing the victims of the Terror, and half of sansculottes who still bear the signs of violent deaths (by starvation, poison, hanging, stabbing, and shooting). The cherubim prove to be disembodied heads with wings and bloody necks, and the seraphim bear the instruments of state oppression, including warrants of arrest and deadly weapons. Also prominent is a decaying, fire-breathing female figure of death, pouring blood or poison upon the Earth below, which is ravaged and war-torn (specifically, the plains of La Vendée, devastated by Hoche's campaigns). Some of this liquid falls from a bottle, and some from her withered breasts. The imagery of liquid corruption – typically in a highly sexual aspect – is prevalent throughout *The Cenci* and significant in *Laon and Cythna* (particularly the 'two dark serpents'). It is interesting to observe that although Shelley's Gothic cadences were criticised as an ineffective medium for making coherent statements, his technique bears distinct similarities to that of a near-contemporary, explicitly political satirist. A more detailed description of 'The Apotheosis...' may be found in *The Works of James Gillray, the Caricaturist: With the Story of His Life and Times*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Chatto and Windus, [1873?]), p. 250.

of successive tyrannies in France was terrible, and felt in the remotest corner of the civilized world. Could they listen to the plea of reason who had groaned under the calamities of a social state, according to the provisions of which, one man riots in luxury while another famishes for want of bread? Can he who the day before was a trampled slave, suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent? This is the consequence of the habits of a state of society to be produced by resolute perseverance and indefatigable hope, and long-suffering and long-believing courage, and the systematic efforts of generations of men of intellect and virtue.<sup>339</sup>

Initially, in spite of his idealisation of liberty, Laon seems the very figure of the rabble-rousing demagogue, or ‘anarch,’ prepared to launch a violent, unpremeditated, and self-glorifying revolution of ‘cleansing fire’ with no consideration for the inevitably dire consequences of such an action. His failure to act upon his egalitarian principles in the case of Cythna (whom he initially treats as a child) and his nightmarish vision reveal that his egotism has effectively subdued his capacity for Uranian love, and Pandemian love was almost certainly not what Shelley had in mind when commenting on *Laon and Cythna* that, ‘Love is celebrated everywhere as the sole law which should govern the moral world.’<sup>340</sup> Uranian love is thus advocated as a replacement for the established cultural super-ego, which Shelley depicts as punitive, arbitrary, and resistant to all changes or reforms, and worthless if it chiefly ‘waste[s] its energies in seeking to avoid’ or to avert ‘actions which are only crimes of convention’. This influence is revived in Laon by the philosophical efforts of the hermit<sup>341</sup> who rescues him in Canto IV – Virgil to his Dante – providing

<sup>339</sup> Preface to *Laon and Cythna*, *POS*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.* p. 47.

<sup>341</sup> Who echoes, with implied criticism of Laon’s old, militant ideology, the passive ideals of Cythna. IV, 1657-62:

‘If blood be shed, ‘tis but a change and choice  
Of bonds, – from slavery to cowardice  
A wretched fall! – uplift thy charmed voice,  
Pour on those evil men the love that lies  
Hovering within those spirit-soothing eyes –  
Arise, my friend, farewell!’



the example of ‘intellect and virtue’ to the would-be revolutionary, as a result of which he comes to accept the entirely selfless principles of Cythna, to the same extreme of willing martyrdom. He intervenes at personal risk to save the life of an enemy soldier (V, 1790-827), protects the unrepentant Othman from a lynch-mob (1990-2034), offers sanctuary to the homicidal madwoman ‘Pestilence’, and finally offers himself up for execution in a vain attempt to secure a pardon for Cythna (XI, 4410-49).

In terms of practical effect, his revolution in sexual ethics (no longer asserting sexual possession of Cythna with his phallic dagger of Canto III, Laon now offers himself up to patriarchal violence in exchange for a guarantee of Cythna’s freedom) seems to produce no better a result: both are once again persecuted by the tyrant, and executed for their pains (XII, 4450-719). Nevertheless, the complete absence of such trauma as both had suffered in their first ordeals (which Cythna faces with more natural fortitude, and less outside assistance than Laon) signals their spiritual immunity from the sado-masochistic system which almost ensnared the ambitious Laon and failed to have any lasting effect on Cythna’s indefatigable hope.<sup>342</sup> The same can hardly be said of the ‘multitude’ (4686) who unprotestingly watch the execution of their former revolutionary idols until a single agitator, sickened to despair at the spectacle, taunts the mob for wilfully wrecking their own interests, and then stabs himself to death in true Gothic fashion (4684-716). Shelley leaves open the possibility that the ultimate effect of this scene will be to leave a deep positive impression on the masses,<sup>343</sup> but the masochistic and self-advertising violence of this final ‘message’ bears too close a resemblance to Laon’s early ‘death or glory’ reasoning to be seen as a definite portent of future reform. The fact that the crowd are more directly influenced by this violent and egotistic suicide

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<sup>342</sup> See the description of Laon being led to execution at XII, 4471-6:

There are no sneers upon his lip which speak  
That scorn or hate has made him bold; his cheek  
Resolve has not turned pale, – his eyes are mild  
And calm, and like the morn about to break,  
Smile on mankind – his heart seems reconciled  
To all things and itself, like a reposing child.

<sup>343</sup> ‘There came a murmur from the crowd, to tell/ Of deep and mighty change which suddenly befell’ (4718-9).

than the passive martyrdom of the protagonists seems more indicative of a continuing cycle of violent upheavals in the name of reform, followed by the rapid degeneration into old, familiar systems of patriarchal corruption. In his posthumous ascension to 'The Temple of the Spirit' (4815), Laon stands as the sole example of a disciple (albeit an unknowing one) of the old, corrupt system, reformed through education and the acceptance of Uranian love as a more worthy moral compass than the laws of society.

The significance of his incestuous relationship with Cythna is chiefly in the demonstration of this general principle: 'To the pure all things are pure!' (VI, 2596) and 'The act itself is nothing'. Incest, like any sexual act in Shelley's consideration, is only as corrupt as the psyches of its participants. Ironically, within this reassessment of the Gothic genre's staple perversion, Shelley's reasoning creates a new position of scepticism: incest is regarded as a fully realised extension of morbid narcissism, and this is clearly the sort of consummation to which Laon is being drawn before his delirium lays bare the Pandemian nature of his passion. The erring pilgrim is rescued from the siren of his 'devouring egotistical fantasy' by the benevolent hermit, who furthermore assumes the role of Virgil in his reasoned criticism of Laon's worldly illusions. Unlike the apparition of 'Alastor', but like that of the *Purgatorio*, the dream-siren of Laon is fully revealed in its hideous, decaying aspect. Upon a second, figurative confrontation with this anthropomorphic fusion of death, despair, and lust (embodied in 'Pestilence'), Laon resists the temptation to all three. Thus purged of his egotism and illusions, he is promptly conducted to paradise by Cythna, who fulfils the function of Beatrice in both life and death. John Taylor Coleridge's review aside, she remains an incorruptible focus of ideal love throughout *Laon and Cythna*, and both attempts to make her the object of a less-than-ideal interpretation of love result in violent traumas of self-contempt for the men involved. Although she may suffer physical violation at the hands of Othman, it is quite clear that if he (or, come to that, Laon) desires her as a sexual possession, he will have to take her as a corpse or a catatonic: even within its 'fleshy chains', her spirit will have no part of

this. Unlike Beatrice Cenci, Cythna is aware that she has that ultimate choice.

Laon is essentially saved through the fortuitous coincidence that the figure he had selected for his ideal antitype on the basis of physical affinity and the narcissistic desire to see his flawed ideals reflected (and thus validated) in another, actually proves to be the spiritual ideal who can bring him to acknowledge his insufficiency of self and thus awaken him to better ideals. In spite of Shelley's sympathetic political stance, his advocacy of unconditional love as a replacement for conventional ethics, and his evident attachment to the motifs of the Gothic, Laon's spiritual ascension is won in spite of rather than as a result of his incestuous leanings.

The major significance of Shelley's departure from the conventional depictions of incest is his refusal to automatically condemn it without consideration, but this does not signify that incestuous couples are any more proof against the insidious pressures of sensuality than any others. In both *Laon and Cythna* and *The Cenci*, the incest taboo is held up for scrutiny as an example of the arbitrary, guilt-centred, ignorant, and generally specious morality that – as in the society depicted by Plato in such works as the *Republic* and *Gorgias* – in fact comes between humanity and any genuine spiritual revolution. It does not, as Shelley himself states, follow that incest itself bears an intrinsic virtue. In fact, it is a repeated pattern in Shelley's works that all such apparent fast-tracks to redemption (as opposed to the patient progress of Socrates' ideal lover, or the arduous treks of Dante, the Redcrosse Knight, and eventually Laon) culminate in disappointment: a theme which achieves somewhat of a sardonic pitch in *Epipsychidion*, as we shall see. Incest, in Shelley's scheme, requires no justification, but nor does it serve as a justification for lust, any more than it serves as a justification for murder.

The total incorruptibility and flawless ideals of Cythna's character may save Laon, but Shelley was aware that this fantasy could not be applied to the world at large, hence the pessimistic undertones in the most 'positive' depiction of incest he relates to Maria Gisborne. In his subsequent major works, Shelley continues to explore the conflicts, temptations, deceptions, and self-

deceptions affecting the would-be idealist, and this pessimism is never dispelled. Sexuality, including incest, may joyfully abound in the mystical realms of *Prometheus Unbound*, but as regards the corrupted realms of humanity, even in the attempt to depict a union after the fashion of the 'Discourse' in which consummated sexuality can be sublimated to higher purposes and not degenerate into sub-human sensuality, Shelley finally expresses the gravest doubts that sexuality can ever be redeemed as a force for the good.

### Ethereal acid: Rousseau, *Julie* and ‘The Triumph of Life’.

In chapter IV I alluded to Rousseau as the direct inspiration for the nature-worshipping, yet self-adoring solitary of ‘Alastor’: a figure from whom Shelley – taking his cue from social prophets Wollstonecraft and Godwin – sought to disassociate himself in his political works.<sup>344</sup> The basic relevance of this statement, however, does not detract from its over-simplicity. Before entering upon an examination of Shelley’s last major work, in which Rousseau figures prominently, it is essential to appreciate the complexity and the development of Shelley’s attitude to this conflicted icon of the Enlightenment.

Shelley’s private statements on Rousseau, with the exception of a very early comment on *The Confessions* to Hogg,<sup>345</sup> display considerable enthusiasm for the infamous author:<sup>346</sup> Rousseau’s reputation in England had suffered ever since the lurid scandals surrounding him came to light, and

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<sup>344</sup> See Patricia Hodgart, *A Preface to Shelley* (London and New York: Longman, 1985), pp. 73-4:

The myth of primitivism was a powerful and attractive one, but, for writers committed to political ends, a dangerous one since its logical conclusion was a denial of progress, a turning away from the problems of ‘real’ life to a concentration on the self. Shelley, in *Alastor*, although obviously seduced by the lures of the primitive ideal, shows an awareness of its inherent dangers.

The Poet in *Alastor* is a true child of Jean-Jacques [Rousseau]. [...] Untouched by civilization [...] he keeps ‘mute conference With his still soul’, driven on by a dream of spiritual beauty until his death in solitude. But Shelley points the warning moral: solitude and introspection are not enough.

Compare Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), translated with an introduction by Peter France (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 32:

Alone for the rest of my life, since it is only in myself that I find consolation, hope and peace of mind, my only remaining duty is towards myself and this is all I desire. [...] Let me give myself over entirely to the pleasure of conversing with my soul, since this is the only pleasure that men cannot take away from me.

<sup>345</sup> Letter to Hogg of 14 May 1811, in *Letters I*, pp. 83-5 (p. 84): ‘The Confessions of Rousseau [...] are either a disgrace to the confessor or a string of falsehoods, probably the latter.’ The latter statement implies a desire to vindicate Rousseau as far as possible, which Shelley did not pursue so avidly in his works for publication.

<sup>346</sup> Letter to Hogg of 18 July 1816, in *Letters I*, pp. 493-4 (p. 494): ‘Rousseau is indeed in my mind the greatest man the world has produced since Milton.’ Letter to Thomas Love Peacock of 12 July 1816, *ibid.*, pp. 480-88 (p. 485), on *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: ‘[...] an overflowing [...] of sublimest genius, and more than human sensibility.’

were confirmed in the bold publication of his *Confessions*;<sup>347</sup> and it was fixed at an all-time low after the French Revolution, whose advocates claimed him as an inspiration to their cause.<sup>348</sup> The view of Rousseau as having actually been responsible for the Revolution and consequent Terror was common currency by the time Shelley was writing, as Byron famously demonstrates in the third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In accusing Rousseau of having engendered a philosophy of destruction, he cites the consciously nurtured egocentrism and virtually self-confessed paranoia<sup>349</sup> which blighted the existence of the 'self-torturing sophist' (*Childe Harold*, III, l. 725), and with which he contrived, like the vampire of *Prometheus Unbound*, to 'infect' an entire nation through his writings:

His love was passion's essence: – as a tree

On fire by lightning, with ethereal flame

Kindled he was, and blasted; for to be

Thus, and enamour'd, were in him the same.

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<sup>347</sup> Following citations from *The Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): Rousseau variously admits to stealing in his youth and passing the blame (pp. 82-5); visiting prostitutes in Venice (307-13); unmarried sexual relations with Thérèse le Vasseur, whom he admits not having been in love with (320-3, 404); abandoning his children by her to a Foundling Hospital, and attempting to justify this with socio-philosophical sophistry (333-5, 347-8). The memory of this abandonment, and the notoriety it earned him, appear to distress him in the later *Reveries* (pp. 139-40), yet he remains outspokenly unrepentant: '[...] I knew that the least dangerous form of education they could have was at the Foundlings' Home, so I put them there. I should do the same thing again with even fewer misgivings if the choice were still before me, [...].'

<sup>348</sup> Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), p. 35:

No sooner had the French Assembly decreed its honors to Rousseau than polemicists on the other side seized upon the *Confessions*, the *Réveries*, and any other scraps of information useful in the *ad hominem* denunciation of revolution. Dwelling upon the most unedifying details, they proclaimed vanity and sensuality to be the keys to the diabolical kingdom that Rousseau had announced in his works, and which another upstart from Corsica was soon to bring to a bloody fruition.

<sup>349</sup> Both *The Confessions* and the *Reveries* abound with Rousseau's repeated insistences that society in general and his former friends in particular (including such major figures of the French Enlightenment as Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Holbach) are leagued up to persecute him. At no point does he openly admit the possibility of paranoid delusion, although in the eighth of his *Reveries* he impersonally describes such a morbid condition:

The physical pain is what we feel least of all when fortune assails us, and when suffering people do not know whom to blame for their misfortunes, they attribute them to a destiny, and personify that destiny, lending it eyes and a mind that takes pleasure in tormenting them. In the same way a gambler who is angered by his losses will fly into a fury against some unknown enemy; he imagines a fate which deliberately persists in torturing him, and having found something to feed his anger on, he storms and rages against the enemy that he has himself created. (*Reveries*, p. 128)

But his was not the love of living dame,  
 Nor of the dead who rise upon our dreams,  
 But of ideal beauty, which became  
 In him existence, and o'erflowing teems  
 Along his burning page, distemper'd though it seems.  
 [...]

But he was phrensied by disease or woe,  
 To that worst pitch of all, which wears a reasoning show.<sup>350</sup>

'Love' and 'disease' are here synonymous.<sup>351</sup> Rousseau's love, aspiring for the ideal yet evidently self-centred, is described as an emotional fever: a fire fuelled upon the self, apparently enhancing it yet actually destroying it. The 'blasted' tree is framed in 'ethereal flame', which is a destructive pretence and not of its essence. In spite of his great sympathy with Rousseau, which is beyond a doubt, Shelley finally makes the ruthless gesture of divesting the dead tree of its false fire in 'The Triumph of Life', where Rousseau's shade appears withered to the resemblance of an 'old root' with 'thin discoloured hair' (first mistaken by the observer for grass) and hollow eye-sockets (182-8). Whilst Byron is not wholly unsympathetic, his description begins to take the form of an accusation: with his early reputation as a man of reason (which, in all fairness, he went out of his way to refute in his biographical works) Rousseau was able to disguise his self-consuming, self-deluding passion behind 'a reasoning show', facilitating the spread of his attractive but destructive

<sup>350</sup> *Childe Harold*, III, ll. 734-60.

<sup>351</sup> See *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, pp. 215, linking Rousseau's fall from literary and ethical grace with his rumoured sexual ailment, and with the wider theme of the failure of Enlightenment ideals such as Rousseau had once advocated:

Rousseau in the poem ['The Triumph of Life'] has terminal syphilis. He is thus an embodiment of the Hollow Ruin that yawns behind Love, and the Terror which succeeded [...] the ideals of the French Revolution. [...] That Rousseau was syphilitic was a notorious accusation made by Voltaire [...] Rousseau's syphilis is obviously the infamous reputation which clings to him after he dies, the 'deep scorn' and the 'dread pass' to which he has been led.

‘fire’ to the human race. The ‘vampyre’ is welcomed into the drawing-room, and the result speaks for itself:

For then he was inspired, and from him came,  
 As from the Pythian’s mystic cave of yore,  
 Those oracles which set the world in flame,  
 Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more:  
 Did he not this for France? [...]

But good with ill they also overthrew,  
 Leaving but ruins, wherewith to rebuild  
 Upon the same foundation, and renew  
 Dungeons and thrones, which the same hour refill’d,  
 As heretofore, because ambition was self-will’d.<sup>352</sup>

Byron’s highly sceptical appraisal of Rousseau’s ego-glorifying philosophy confirms the implicit criticisms within Shelley’s works of the same period (1816-17). His mythologised depiction of the Revolution – ‘oracles which set the world in flame’ – recalls the ‘cleansing fire’ that Laon (who, prior to his reform, was an extremely ambitious and ‘self-will’d’ excuse for a prophet) had intended to let loose upon Islam. Laon, whom I earlier identified as an advocate of the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime, might equally be compared to Rousseau,<sup>353</sup> whose resource to solitude and nature was by no means the assiduous project of self-effacing empathy which Shelley

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<sup>352</sup> *Childe Harold*, III, ll. 761-78.

<sup>353</sup> Rousseau and Wordsworth were subject to comparison during Shelley’s time. See *Rousseau in England*, pp. 75-6:

According to Hazlitt [in *The Examiner*, 14 April 1816] the only thing that distinguishes Wordsworth from Rousseau is his habit of pretending to be interested in a celandine when he is really interested in nothing but himself. Rousseau, by contrast, does not pretend to even the outward show of imagination. He knows his subject to be himself [...].



idealises in ‘On Love’ (in which bonds with nature are considered as a last resort when human sympathy is completely unavailable). Although Rousseau appears to cite ‘blissful self-abandonment’ in ‘the immensity of this beautiful order’ (*Reveries*, p. 108) as his spiritual experience of nature, this praise of a non-human empathy is apparently at odds with his protestations of spiritual self-sufficiency, with overtones of morbidity and hubris more appropriate to a Shelleyan anti-hero: ‘[...] finding no food left on earth for my soul, I gradually learnt to feed it on its own substance and seek all its nourishment within myself’ (ibid., p. 35).

[...] if there is a state where the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there [...] What is the source of our happiness in such a state? Nothing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence; as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God. (ibid., pp. 88-9)

Shelleyan characters from *Zastrozzi* to the Cencis – and most pertinently, the ‘Alastor’ poet – were brought to various untimely demises by this illusion of self-sufficiency, which Shelley clearly dismisses in ‘On Love.’ The state of spiritual self-consumption which Rousseau seems to glorify<sup>354</sup> is comparable to the same condition which Shelley presents in images of cannibalism and vampirism, and less overtly in the outward decay or unnatural ageing of such solitary wanderers as the protagonists of ‘Alastor’ and *Epipsyichidion*, not to mention the decayed Rousseau of ‘The Triumph of Life’. Notwithstanding the fulsome praise Shelley lavishes upon the author of *La*

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<sup>354</sup> At a later point, however, as Rousseau describes this condition in an extremely morbid fashion and falls short of actually stating its consolations, it seems likely that he is implicitly recognising that his supposed self-sufficiency is a deeply flawed compromise, not pursued out of ideal choice:

Reduced to my own self, it is true that I feed on my own substance, but this does not diminish, and I can be self-sufficient even though I have to ruminate as it were on nothing, and though my dried-up imagination and inactive mind no longer provide my heart with any nourishment. My soul, darkened and encumbered by my bodily organs, sinks daily beneath their weight; bowed under this heavy burden, it no longer has the strength to soar as it once did above this old integument. (*Reveries*, p. 124)

*Nouvelle Héloïse* – ‘[...] a mind so powerfully bright as to cast a shade of falsehood on the records that are called reality’<sup>355</sup> – he does not prove so eager to leap to Rousseau’s defence in public.

Shelley’s published works (or those intended for publication) reveal a strand of scepticism and the desire, mixed with equivocal gestures of approbation, to disassociate his own ideological projects from those of his discredited predecessor.

Shelley’s differing attitudes to Rousseau as poet – based upon his single work that could be classed as imaginative (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*) – and Rousseau as moral philosopher – an altogether more controversial matter – are set out in *A Defence of Poetry*, where Rousseau is ranked initially with poets who ‘have celebrated the dominion of love, planting as it were trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and force’ (including ‘Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser’ and ‘Calderon’. *PP*, p. 491). This is rapidly qualified by denying Rousseau’s parity with another, even more distinguished, collection of poets, as a conscious advocate of moral improvement:

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples, in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited, had they never lived. [...] But 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 [...].<sup>356</sup>

Shelley qualifies his naming of Rousseau in a footnote: ‘[...] Rousseau was essentially a poet. The others, even Voltaire, were mere reasoners.’ This does not, however, detract from the

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<sup>355</sup> *Letters I*, p. 485.

<sup>356</sup> *PP*, p. 502.

significance of the point revealed in ‘exertions [...] in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity’ (ibid.), clearly alluding to Rousseau’s philosophical, non-poetical works such as *Émile* and *The Social Contract* (1762), which had fallen out of favour as valid moral tracts in the post-Revolution period. Shelley’s footnote – allowing Rousseau some exceptional status on account of his ‘poetic’ abilities in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* – is only a partial reprieve from his failure as a moral ‘reasoner’, of which Shelley was convinced from the early days of his own public attempts at social philosophy:

The murders during the period of the French Revolution, and the despotism which has since been established, prove that the doctrines of philanthropy and freedom were but shallowly understood. [...] Voltaire was the flatterer of kings, though in his heart he despised them – so far he has been instrumental in the present slavery of his country. Rousseau gave licence by his writings to passions that only incapacitate and contract the human heart – so far hath he prepared the necks of his fellow-beings for that yoke of galling and dishonourable servitude which at this moment it bears.<sup>357</sup>

This early condemnation is typical of the conventional post-Revolutionary English opinion of Rousseau, shared by conservatives and liberals (for the sake of their own political credibility) alike. Of the latter group, none condemned more vigorously than Mary Wollstonecraft, whose disgust at the notoriously misogynistic fifth book of *Émile*<sup>358</sup> led to her describing its author as a very vampiric creature indeed, pursuing ‘his ferocious flight back to the night of sensual ignorance’

<sup>357</sup> From *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*, 1812, in *PrW*, pp. 39-55 (p. 52).

<sup>358</sup> *Émile*, pp. 357-406. This chapter consists of Rousseau’s depiction of the ‘ideal’ woman, and variously instructs its female readers to consider themselves as inherently ‘passive and weak’ (358); as good for nothing if not to please men (359); as naturally coquettish and vain (365, 367); to submit to male injustice for the sake of preserving female ‘gentleness’ (370); to develop the sensual talents of harem-women (374); not to cultivate knowledge (376); to rely upon their ‘fathers and husbands’ for spiritual instruction and not trust their own judgement (377); to dress simply but suggestively to aid voyeurism (394); and to believe that this ‘ideal’ is a natural construct, and not that of Rousseau’s heated sensuality (390). Aside from the blatant paradox involved in his attempt to argue that the restraint imposed upon women facilitates their natural development of character, Rousseau clearly lapses into Alastor-like fantasy with the following: ‘What a joy for a noble soul when the pride of virtue is joined to beauty! Bring the heroine of a romantic novel into reality’ (391). Ironically, *Émile* book V was very well received by the English literary establishment upon publication (cf. *Rousseau in England*, p. 17).

(*Rights of Woman*, p. 87) and thus ultimately emerging as a wrecker rather than an improver of human society and systems.<sup>359</sup> Wollstonecraft's opinion would not have been lost upon Shelley, whose own vindication of sexual equality in *Laon and Cythna*, his evident scepticism of conventional patriarchal 'virtues',<sup>360</sup> and his consistent belief in sensuality as a moral and spiritual black hole, would have left him little inclined to apologise for the 'reasoner' behind *Émile*. The Rousseau praised in the letter from Geneva and *The Defence of Poetry* is specifically the 'poet' behind *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

In singling out this novel<sup>361</sup> as a sublime 'victory over sensuality and force', Shelley identifies it as an exceptional event in the career of its author: behind the screen of his fictional avatar – the passionate and pitiable, yet unappealingly egotistic Saint-Preux (the tutor and secret lover of Rousseau's ideal heroine, Julie d'Étange) – Rousseau embarks upon what is evidently self-

<sup>359</sup> *Rights of Woman*, p. 160: It is no small attestation to the seductive qualities of Rousseau's 'poetry' that Wollstonecraft, at the close of her condemnatory analysis of *Émile* V, withdraws from condemning Rousseau *per se*, although her tone is more of regretful pity than of approbation, and basically accuses him of mental and spiritual auto-erotism:

But all Rousseau's errors in reasoning arose from sensibility, and sensibility to their charms women are very ready to forgive. When he should have reasoned he became impassioned, and reflection inflamed his imagination instead of enlightening his understanding. Even his virtues also led him farther astray; for, born with a warm constitution and lively fancy, nature carried him towards the other sex with such eager fondness that he soon became lascivious. [...] yet when fear, delicacy, or virtue restrained him, he debauched his imagination, and reflecting on the sensations to which fancy gave force, he traced them in the most glowing colours, and sunk them deep into his soul.

Her choice of a dagger image for Rousseau's 'glowing' fantasies is particularly notable in the context of Gothic imagery (of which Rousseau is certainly the object in *Rights of Woman*), in which, as we have seen, it signifies an unholy alliance of power, self-destruction, and sexuality.

<sup>360</sup> Thus rejecting the conventional essentialism of Rousseau, who states in *Émile* that men should be 'active and strong' (p. 358), and denies that men have as great a capacity for empathy as women (p. 376): '[...] when a man feigns to prefer my interest to his own, no matter what protestations he may make to cover this lie, I am quite sure that he is telling one.' Since Shelley firmly believed and argued that such distinctions were pernicious, it is no wonder he thought best to denounce Rousseau's philosophy whilst accepting his talents.

<sup>361</sup> Letter to Hogg of 18 July 1816, in *Letters I*, pp. 493-4:

La Nouvelle Heloise [sic.] [...] tho in some respects absurd & prejudiced, is yet the production of a mighty Genius, & acquires an interest I had not conceived it to possess when giving & receiving influences from the scenes by which it was inspired. Rousseau is indeed in my mind the greatest man the world has produced since Milton.

The praises of Rousseau in the letters written of Shelley's 1816 travels in Switzerland (cf. *Letters I*, pp. 480-94), whilst certainly significant, must be somewhat qualified by certain factors. Most importantly, the narrow time period which they encompass. Secondly, that they relate very specifically to Shelley's reading at the time of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which he qualifies in the statement that the novel, 'tho in some respects absurd & prejudiced, is yet the production of a mighty Genius'. Shelley's view of Rousseau was to re-appraised throughout his life, but would never achieve an unqualified state of approval.

criticism, and of a more psychologically penetrating nature than that of *The Confessions*. Various correspondences between the two works point to the semi-autobiographical status of Saint-Preux – not to mention his devotion to egotism and sensuality, which are only overcome in the closing stages of the novel. Saint-Preux shares Swiss nationality with his author, is of a similar social class, has similar tastes in women above his conventional standing,<sup>362</sup> has similar scepticism in the virtues of French high society,<sup>363</sup> and shares an embarrassing and highly pertinent experience with his author: a semi-willing, but much-repenting visit to a brothel, at the urging of casual friends, but against his better judgement. Rousseau recounts this incident in *The Confessions* (pp. 307-8), depicting it as an act of ‘weakness’ under the pressure of patriarchal custom, but stating that he believed himself (wrongly, in fact) in the aftermath to be diseased and contaminated. Rousseau inflicts similar circumstances and sentiments upon the male protagonist of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (pp. 217-20). The mutual, pathological disgust of Rousseau and Saint-Preux at the prostitutes would certainly have found approbation with the author who condemned this institution as both morally debasing and disease-spreading in the Note to *Queen Mab* and the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks...’. Conceivably, however, he may have questioned Rousseau’s convictions as a would-be reformer of the social prejudices responsible for this sexual perversion, bearing in mind

<sup>362</sup> *Confessions*, p. 131: ‘[...] sempstresses, maids, and little shopgirls did not interest me. What I wanted were young ladies. Everyone has his fantasy; this has always been mine [...].’

<sup>363</sup> *Reveries*, pp. 133-4:

I well remember how in my brief periods of prosperity these same solitary walks which give me such pleasure today were tedious and insipid to me. [...] I took with me the turmoil of futile ideas which had occupied me in the salon; the memory of the company I had left followed me in my solitude, the fumes of self-love and the bustle of the world dimmed the freshness of the groves in my eyes and troubled my secluded peace. Though I fled into the depths of the woods, an importunate crowd followed me everywhere and came between me and Nature. Only when I had detached myself from the social passions and their dismal train did I find her once again in all her beauty.

*La Nouvelle Héloïse* contains similar Wordsworthian sentiments (p. 197):

[Saint-Preux to Julie] [...] judge if I am right in calling this crowded scene a wasteland, and of being alarmed by a solitude in which I find only an empty appearance of sentiment and of sincerity which changes every instant and falsifies itself, in which I see only spectres and phantoms which strike the eye for a moment and disappear as soon as one tries to touch them?

This Gothic imagery, with a possible Platonic source (the false shadows of worldly life in the *Republic*), is revived in ‘The Triumph of Life’, as will be discussed.

Rousseau's exultation of female chastity,<sup>364</sup> female sexual objectification, and female subjugation, which Shelley and Wollstonecraft had both determined to be the very causes of prostitution.

Nevertheless, though Shelley could hardly have avoided judging the author of *Émile* as a hypocritical sophist, the author of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and even that of the paranoid yet idealistic *Reveries*, afforded more grounds for sympathy, albeit not of the most healthy nature. The most significant correspondence between Rousseau and his character-avatar is demonstrated in *The Confessions*, as Rousseau describes the process by which he imagined and developed his novel, and most significantly the character of Julie. Rousseau's imaginative method seems to confirm the morbid doubts of Shelley and those Dante expresses in the dream of the siren: the artist's paradoxical ability to become completely withdrawn into the ego<sup>365</sup> by an act of will, through the very desire to fully empathise – to love and to be loved:

How could it be that, possessed of a naturally expansive soul, for which to live was to love, I should never yet have found a friend who was all my own, a true friend, such as I felt I had myself been made to be? [...] Consumed by the need to love without ever having been able to satisfy it, I saw myself reaching the threshold of old age and dying without having lived.

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<sup>364</sup> Rousseau reinforces a classic patriarchal double-standard in *Émile*, p. 361: he determines that women are more bound to remain faithful, since female in chastity 'dissolves the family and breaks all the bonds of nature.' He claims that this distinction is 'not a human institution', but the family which it violates – based as it is upon Rousseau's elaborate and patently unnatural scheme of restraining girls' development – is clearly a human institution, and one which Rousseau's liberal commentators believed much in need of improvement, or replacement. Shelley, for one, does not believe anyone bound to adapt themselves to the conventions of an imperfect institution, as Rousseau evidently does in the case of women exclusively: 'Girls [...] ought to be constrained very early. [...] All their lives they will be enslaved to the most continual and most severe of constraints – that of the proprieties.' (p. 369) Why 'the proprieties' qualify as a natural institution, Rousseau does not elaborate upon.

<sup>365</sup> For Rousseau's unhealthily creative ego, see Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), pp. 224-5:

Rousseau could not fail to be attracted by the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. [...] To the mature Goethe Rousseau's account of the sculptor who became enamored of his own creation and breathed into it life by the sheer intensity of his desire seemed a delirious confusion of the lanes of being, an attempt to drag ideal beauty down to the level of sensuous realization. But a passion thus conceived exactly satisfies the romantic requirement. For though the romanticist wishes to abandon himself to the rapture of love, he does not wish to transcend his own ego.

I pictured to myself love and friendship, those two idols of my heart, in the most ravishing of guises. I delighted in embellishing them with all the charms of the sex I had always adored. I invented two friends, women rather than men [...] To one of them I gave a lover, [...] Bewitched by my two charming models, I identified as closely as I could with the lover and the friend; but I made him young and amiable, while giving him for the rest the virtues and defects I felt I myself possessed.

Wherever I looked I saw only the two charming girls, their friend, their intimates, the region where they lived, the objects created or embellished for them by my imagination. I was no longer in possession of myself for a single moment; and my delirium never left me. After much unavailing effort to ward off these fictions, I at last succumbed wholly to their seduction, [...].<sup>366</sup>

In this account, Rousseau does not attempt to glorify his spiritual isolation in the later style of the *Reveries*, and in fact virtually identifies his fantasy-mongering – behind its spiritual trappings – as the ‘seductive indolence’<sup>367</sup> of Pandemian love. This self-realisation informs upon the ‘defects’ with which he bestows Saint-Preux, the fictional ‘lover’ in question, thus granting a prototype to the Romantic authors: the generous, idealistic (or once-idealistic), philosophical hero, who, whilst not consciously deviating from humane principles, has an extreme blind spot on the matter of applying them to his own passions.<sup>368</sup> This category may be affixed to Victor Frankenstein, Prometheus, or

<sup>366</sup> *Confessions*, pp. 416, 420, 424.

<sup>367</sup> *Confessions*, p. 415:

Soon I saw assembled round about me all the objects that had filled me with emotion when I was young [...] I saw myself surrounded by a seraglio of houris composed of my old acquaintances, to whom I was drawn by desires that were not new to me either. My blood quickened and caught fire, my head, for all its greying hair, was in a whirl [...] The amorous intoxication that seized me, although sudden and insane, was so lasting and powerful, that it could have been cured by nothing less than the unforeseen and terrible crisis of misfortune into which it precipitated me.

<sup>368</sup> Rousseau virtually defines the character in a footnote, commenting on Saint-Preux’s secret, seductive early letters to Julie. *Julie*, p. 68, n.: ‘Instead of teaching Julie he corrupts her [...] One feels, however, that he has a sincere love of virtue, but his passion leads him astray [...].’

more overtly sexually-motivated antiheroes such as Goethe's Faust and 'Young Werther,' and the poet of 'Alastor'. For, notwithstanding his protestations of a spiritual, virtuous love governing his being, it is made apparent throughout *La Nouvelle Héloïse* that Saint-Preux has enslaved himself to an obviously egotistic, amoral, and potentially destructive passion.

Sexuality and death are frequently associated in Saint-Preux's appeals to Julie, when their secret relationship is brought under threat by her family obligations, culminating in her arranged marriage to Monsieur de Wolmar. Although Saint-Preux does not enjoy the same success as Werther, this does not discourage him – at the height of his despair – from suicidal behaviour,<sup>369</sup> including an attempt to inoculate himself with Julie's smallpox by kissing her (*Julie*, pp. 245-50). More sinister and revealing are the ultra-patriarchal sentiments he expresses to Julie in protest at her forthcoming marriage, in a scene after the fashion of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore:

I prefer to lose you rather than share you ... Would that Heaven had given me a courage equal to the passion which shakes me! ... Before you might be debased in that fatal union, abhorred by love and condemned by honor, with my own hand I should plunge a dagger into your breast. I should drain your chaste heart of blood which infidelity might not taint. With this pure blood I would mix that which burns in my veins [...] That breast, the throne of love, torn open by my hand, gushing forth copious streams of blood and life [...]. (*Julie*, p. 252)

This startling fantasy of pseudo-rape, from the 'imagination' of a character who is evidently a confessional portrait, implies that Rousseau already had himself marked down as a sufferer of deadly Gothic passions before Wollstonecraft and Byron levelled the accusation. If Shelley could

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<sup>369</sup> Of particular note in relation to the Shelleys is Saint-Preux's attempt, in emulation of Spenser's despair, to persuade an unsentimental friend, Lord Bomstom, to join him in mutual suicide (*Julie*, pp. 263-5). Having lost Julie to Wolmar, Saint-Preux claims that he has nothing left to live for. Bomstom castigates him with the advice that he could at least try to live to do good to others. The advice is reminiscent of that which Woodville gives to Matilda (*Matilda*, pp. 202-3) and may have been an unacknowledged inspiration for this scene.



hardly approve of this condition, he could certainly sympathise with it, bearing in mind his own sceptically drawn ‘self-portraits’ in *Laon and Cythna*,<sup>370</sup> *Epipsychidion*, and ‘Invocation to Misery’. Saint-Preux’s fantasy of mutual, blood-mingling suicide – which he depicts as an honour-killing, without actually naming any advantages it might afford in the hereafter – is another version of the Gothic fantasy of ‘eternal love’ symbolised as both bodies lying in the same grave: a fantasy which Shelley – after the fashion of ‘Monk’ Lewis – de-romanticises by consistently portraying corpses as decayed and repulsive objects, incapable of inspiring any form of love except to the most appallingly self-absorbed fetishist. Count Cenci, for example, does not shy away from the taint of revealed necrophilia, as does Laon: Cenci’s consciously Pandemian ‘love’ is both attracted to and the cause of decay and dissolution.

Saint-Preux occupies a mid-point on this scale of corruption:<sup>371</sup> whilst he is not entirely honest about the sordid nature of this death-drive, he makes very little effort at disguising his sadistic tendencies, and none whatsoever in the case of his masochistic tendencies. The contaminated kiss he invites is a supremely morbid gesture, recalling Byron’s description of the ‘diseased’ and ‘burning’ Rousseau, whose so-called ‘love’ was a ‘self-will’d’, parasitic passion. Throughout *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as Saint-Preux damns himself in his own letters and the ‘authorial’ footnotes express their disapproval of him, it becomes apparent that his only claim to heroic status would be established by the reader adopting the very mistake Saint-Preux entertains for most of the novel: the assumption that ‘love’ is an unqualified good, and that it is always ‘ethereal flame’, as opposed to merely the fire that burns and destroys. Rousseau, however, the sometime champion of sensibility, here appears highly sceptical, consistently revealing the

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<sup>370</sup> See *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 67, describing Laon as ‘an idealized yet subtly ironized self-portrait’.

<sup>371</sup> If the notion of the sentimental Saint-Preux as a proto-Cenci seems a little extreme, see *Julie*, p. 57, where Saint-Preux protests about his physical absence from Julie. His depiction of spiritual union is quite disturbingly rooted in the earthly, and the closing image of enforced penetration seems straight out of Beatrice Cenci’s post-rape delirium:

[...] all that is truly alive in me dwells forever near you. My soul roams with impunity over your eyes, over your lips, over your breast, over all your charms. It penetrates everywhere like a subtle vapour, and I am happier despite you than I ever was with your permission.

downward-gazing, ego-flattering, and somewhat hubristic<sup>372</sup> nature of his antihero's passions and rape-fantasies. The character Lord Bomstom, who sets himself up as a sceptical mentor for Saint-Preux, describes the love between him and Julie as a 'corrosive acid' (p. 167), which 'insinuates' into the soul, overpowering and potentially destroying virtue and reason. This pessimism is confirmed in the brothel episode: guaranteed as he believes it to be by another cherished fantasy, which Dante would have recognised, Saint-Preux places an unrealistic faith in his own spiritual purity amidst the corruption of Parisian high society:

Oh love! Oh the pure sentiments which I possess because of it! [...] How I rejoice to see there the image of virtue shining in all its brilliance, to contemplate your image there, oh Julie, seated on a throne of glory and with a breath dissipating all those delusions! I feel my oppressed soul revive, [...] along with my love I regain all the sublime sentiments which make it worthy of its object. (p. 204)

Although this attempt to set Julie up as a personal Beatrice does not avert the humiliating débâcle of the brothel encounter, it is not the most inappropriate characterisation. Her ultimate fate confirms her as an essentially ideal character (her life is voluntarily sacrificed to rescue that of her son: pp. 395-407), and she certainly attempts the role of Saint-Preux's good genius, albeit with little enough success. Her replies to his excessively passionate, self-pitying epistles frequently take the form of admonishments and counsel.<sup>373</sup> Saint-Preux's lack of emotional development, and sado-

<sup>372</sup> For example, at *Julie*, p. 195 (Saint-Preux to Julie):

Let all the beauties of the universe try to seduce me! [...] Let everything conspire to wrench you from my heart, Let them pierce it, let them rend it, let them break this faithful mirror of Julie; her pure image will not cease to be reflected even in the smallest fragment. Nothing is capable of destroying it. No, the supreme power itself could not go that far [...].

The character certainly does not enjoy the sympathies of Rousseau in the *Reveries*, who had more or less rejected all human and social relationships, but kept the hope of sustaining a relationship with God.

<sup>373</sup> After Saint-Preux's Parisian lapse, for example, Julie advises him much after the later fashion of Shelley's Cythna ('Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself./ Nor hate another's crime, nor loathe thine own. [...] The past is Death's, the future is thine own [...].') *Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3388-94). Cf. *Julie*, p. 223: 'An involuntary error is pardoned and forgotten easily. But for the future, hold well to this maxim from which I shall never swerve: he who

masochistic lapses throughout the novel (his final temptation to mutual suicide occurring at the close of part IV, p. 338, after exhaustive attempts by various characters to instil in him a sense of empathy or social responsibility) indicate his complete lack of empathy even with Julie. His gesture of setting her up as a beatified figure thus proves completely artificial: like the imaginary figures Rousseau recalls as having created for personal solace, which subsequently dominated him, absorbed all his capacity for 'love' and 'friendship' and thus increased his alienation from true human relationships, Julie as the ideal and unattainable 'image of virtue' only serves to limit Saint-Preux's capacity for virtue.

The physical beauty of Dante's Beatrice, in similar fashion to that of earthly 'beloveds' in Plato's *Symposium*, serves only as a reflection of absolute, spiritual beauty and the first stage on the lover's ascent to that consummation. Saint-Preux never proceeds beyond this first stage, always demanding the presence and possession of the physical.<sup>374</sup> His threat to stab Julie and thus establish

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can be deceived twice on these occasions was not actually deceived the first time.' Julie's forgiving and humane attitude stands in contrast to the medieval, possessive, violent character of Saint-Preux's sexual ethics.

<sup>374</sup> In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, pp. 220-1, Babbitt attributes similar sentiments to Rousseau:

We are not to suppose that Rousseau's love even when most ideal is really exalted above the fleshy level. Byron indeed says of Rousseau that "his was not the love of living dame but of ideal beauty," and if this were strictly true Rousseau might be accounted a Platonist. But any particular beautiful object is for Plato only a symbol or adumbration of a supersensuous beauty; so that an earthly love can be at best only a stepping-stone to the Uranian Aphrodite. The terrestrial and the heavenly loves are not in short run together, whereas the essence of Rousseauistic love is this very blending. "Rousseau," says Joubert, "had a voluptuous mind. In his writings the soul is always mingled with the body and never distinct from it. No one has ever rendered more vividly the impression of the flesh touching the spirit and the delights of their marriage."

I would contest that Rousseau's highly sceptical portrayal of the voluptuous-minded Saint-Preux, who is perhaps even incapable of love (*Julie*, p. 198: 'Sensual man, will you never know how to love?'), leaves Rousseau's personal convictions in doubt. On the subject of exaltation of the physical against conventional Platonic ideals, it is interesting to note an expression of Julie's at *Julie* pp. 190-1, and the accompanying footnote of Rousseau-out-of-persona:

[...] consult your inmost heart [...] It is there that you will see that eternal image of true beauty, the contemplation of which inspires us with a holy enthusiasm, an image which our passions defile ceaselessly but can never efface.\* [...] [note] \*The true philosophy of lovers is that of Plato; while the passion lasts, they never have any other. A sensitive man cannot forsake this philosopher; a cold reader cannot endure him.

Although this enthusiasm should be balanced against Rousseau's denial of Plato's non-essentialist sexual ethics in the *Republic* (*Émile*, pp. 362-3, *Julie*, p. 108), it does appear that at least during the writing of *Julie*, Rousseau's ideas on love and sexuality were not far removed from those later held by Shelley. This includes the undoubted reluctance to dispense with the physical side entirely, but the recognition that this might for some be the only absolute guarantee against morbid lust.

his sexual ‘ownership’ comes in response to Julie’s claim that, in spite of her forthcoming marriage, the love between her and Saint-Preux can continue on a purely spiritual level. His dubious claims of spiritual attraction are further undermined by his admission that

our love used to be so interwoven with her person that I could not separate them. [...]

My imagination stubbornly resisted marks on that lovely face, for as soon as I saw a smallpox scar on it, it was no longer Julie’s. (p. 285-6)

As it turns out, Julie is not significantly scarred, but this makes it extremely apparent that Saint-Preux’s ‘image of virtue’ is an image of physical perfection upon which he projects his own ideals of virtue. Within this aborted relationship, Julie’s status turns out to have been nothing more than a visual aid for a latter-day Narcissus, as Lord Bomstom – the novel’s most sceptical voice of reason – points out in his attempts to direct Saint-Preux onto a less egotistic path:

Do you know what has always made you love virtue? In your eyes it has taken on the form of that lovely woman who typifies it so well, and so dear an image could hardly let you lose the inclination for it. But will you never love virtue for its own sake, and will you not court the good of your own accord, as Julie has done? (p. 343)

Saint-Preux’s ‘inclination’ to virtue is not apparent in his sexual ethics, which account for most of our experiences of his character. ‘Love elevated me, it made me equal to you,’ he protests to Julie, urging against the break-up of a relationship in which he has been observed in drunkenness (pp. 114-6), attempted duelling (126-36), sexual perversion, and outspoken sadism. Focused solely upon the consummation of his passion, and subsequently upon repeating that physical experience, virtue becomes for him a matter of form alone in his ‘courtly love’ revival, as opposed to a Platonic

state of mind encompassing empathy, patience, and self-restraint. '[...] [T]he pleasures of vice and the honor of virtue constitute a combination you would find enjoyable. Is that your morality? [...] you grow tired of being honorable quite quickly!' (p. 42) writes Julie, in response to Saint-Preux's complaint of having voluntarily exercised self-restraint for two months, for which he now feels entitled to some 'reward' (41). Furthermore, he complains at her health and vivacity, which do not seem to him the signs of 'a violent, ungovernable passion': '[...] I should prefer to see you still ill rather than see this contented air [...] Have you so soon forgotten that you were not like this when you were begging for my mercy?' Recalling that the corrupt worldly lover of the *Phaedrus* – next of kin to the Pandemian lover of *The Symposium* – enjoys 'a state of inferiority and subservience' in his beloved, the morbid tendency of Saint-Preux's passion is delineated almost from the beginning of the novel. If Rousseau is sincere in his footnoted exaltation of Platonic love, his choice of fictionalised avatar could hardly have been more sceptical or soul-searching.

Self-representative characters, as we have seen, play a major role in Shelley's works of the 1816-17 period (to some extent, this applies to the 'Alastor' poet, Laon, and Lionel of 'Rosalind and Helen'). It is thus probable that his recognition of the technique and sympathy with its Socratic aims ('Reproach not thine own soul, but know thyself') influenced his enthusiastic reception of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, in spite of the negative public opinion of its author he had previously absorbed. I have stated that Shelley was unwilling to express his new-found admiration in a public medium, and the praise he eventually gives in *A Defence of Poetry* seems a token gesture while Rousseau is clearly excluded from Shelley's exalted circle of world-changing poets. An exception to this rule, albeit one left uncompleted and unpublished in its author's lifetime, was, however, a work-in-progress in 1817. Shelley's essay *On Christianity* attempts possibly the most radical redemptive argument, or challenge, that could be presented to the Western moral establishment of the time: a direct comparison between the life and ideals of Rousseau, and those of Jesus Christ.

The story of Jesus, Shelley reckons, 'is a simple tale, natural, probable, full of heart moving

truth. Every religion and every *revolution* can furnish with regard to some of its most important particulars a parallel series of events.<sup>375</sup> (italics mine). When we recall the association Shelley made between the failure of the Revolution and the Crucifixion in *Prometheus Unbound* (Act I, 546-85), the nature of this ‘parallel’ is clear to us. Shelley proceeds to describe the Roman Empire of Jesus’s time, after the fashion of his allegorical ‘Islam,’ as an archetypal *Ancien Régime*:

Sentiments of liberty and heroism no longer lived but in the lamentations of those who had felt, but had survived their influence; [...] Accumulations of wealth and power were inordinately great. The most abject of mankind, freedmen, eunuchs, and every species of satellite attendant on a court became invested with inexhaustible resources. [...] Refinement in arts and letters distorted from its natural tendency to promote benevolence and truth, became subservient to lust and luxury. [...] The intercourse of man with man was that of tyrant with slave [...].<sup>376</sup>

Into this corrupt society emerges the figure of a martyr, who in Shelley’s description bears more resemblance to the ‘self-torturing’, sadomasochistic Rousseau, than to any conventional portrayal of Jesus Christ:

A man of ardent genius, and impatient virtue perishes in stern and resolute opposition to tyranny, injustice and superstition. He refuses, he despises pardon. He exults in the torturing flames and the insolent mockery of the oppressor. It is a triumph to him beyond all triumphs that the multitude accumulate scorn and execration on his head

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<sup>375</sup> *PrWI*, p. 247.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-8.

solely because his heart has known no measure in the love it bore them<sup>377</sup> [...].<sup>378</sup>

The parallel is explicitly stated later in the essay, as Shelley mounts a spirited defence of Rousseau, who advocated, like Jesus (as he states), the ‘dogma of the equality of mankind’ (p. 266). Shelley argues on behalf of both of these ‘misunderstood martyrs’ that literal interpretation of their expressions is what neither of them intended: ‘If we would profit by the wisdom of a sublime and poetical mind we must beware of the vulgar error of interpreting literally every expression which employ.’ (ibid.) Although he applies this exclusively to the primitivist strain in their mutual philosophies,<sup>379</sup> claiming this to have been a recommendation of ‘a pure and simple life’ (ibid.) as opposed to the destruction of all civilised forms, it is an all-purpose statement that allows for the redemption of a ‘poetical’, non-literal Rousseau from the depths of sophistry into which Rousseau the literal man of reason had sunk.<sup>380</sup>

<sup>377</sup> Compare Rousseau’s self-image in the *Reveries*, p. 27:

The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul, and have violently broken all the threads that bound me to them. I would have loved my fellow-men in spite of themselves.

<sup>378</sup> *PrWI*, p. 247.

<sup>379</sup> In the case of Jesus, this relates to the arguments against materialism in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6. 19-34, in *Oxford Study Bible*, pp. 1273-4).

<sup>380</sup> Shelley takes this argument somewhat further in the case of Jesus, claiming not only that his words have been misunderstood, but that his expressions have been distorted by his ‘biographers’ (*PrWI*, p. 269). Dismissing the ‘contradictions’ he claims were thus created in the character presented, Shelley proceeds to construct a Jesus very much after his own ideals:

They represent him as narrow, superstitious, or exquisitely vindictive and malicious. – They insert in the midst of a strain of impassioned eloquence, or sagest exhortation, a sentiment only remarkable for its drivelling folly. But [...] They have left sufficiently clear indications of the genuine character of Jesus Christ to rescue it forever from the imputations cast upon it by their ignorance and fanaticism. We discover that he is the enemy of oppression and of falshood, [sic.] that he is the advocate of equal justice, that he is neither disposed to sanction bloodshed or deceit under whatsoever pretences [...]. It is utterly incredible that this man said that if you hated your enemy you would find it to your account to return him good for evil, since by such temporary oblivion of vengeance you would heap coals of fire upon his head. (ibid.)

One could speculate on a number of reasons why this essay was left incomplete. The essentially anti-Biblical arguments perhaps inspired little hope that any publisher would accept it, and it is also possible that Shelley recognised the somewhat wishful and potentially narcissistic strand of his reasoning, attempting to ‘claim’ what he saw as two maligned heroes for his own cause. Shelley’s strenuous denial of philosophical contradictions in the true philosophy of Jesus could hardly have avoided drawing attention to a glaring contradiction in Shelleyan philosophy in this very essay, where (in spite of his portrayal of an ideal Jesus as an unqualified pacifist) he lauds the assassins of Julius Caesar as ‘holy patriots’ and just revolutionaries, claiming the murder was necessary (p. 254). Considering the fate of Laon-as-revolutionary, published in the same year, this is to say the least somewhat surprising, and on reflection Shelley could hardly have failed to notice that the completion and publication of *On Christianity* could do

*On Christianity* concludes with the statement that Christianity, pure in its original conception, was afterwards perverted by its supposed adherents and merely cited as a rubber stamp to lend authority to the older, corrupt systems (pp. 269-71). Rousseau is not named in these concluding paragraphs, but his established position in this historical ‘parallel’ suggests the application of this same argument to his philosophies, later claimed by the French revolutionary authorities as their inspiration, prior to their degeneration into old-fashioned tyranny. Shelley thus revises the established practice of blaming Rousseau for the Terror, fashioning a situation in which to do so would also leave one logically obliged to blame Jesus for the corruption of institutionalised Christianity. He accompanies this implicit challenge with the claim that:

some benefit has not failed to flow from the imperfect attempts which have been made to erect a system of equal rights to property and power upon the basis of arbitrary institutions. They have undoubtedly in every case from the very instability of their foundation, failed. Still they constitute a record of those epochs at which a true sense of justice suggested itself to the understandings of men, so that they consented to forego all the cherished delights of luxury, all the habitual gratifications arising out of the possession or the expectations of power, all the superstitions which the accumulated authority of ages had made dear and venerable to them. (pp. 270-1)

Recalling that Rousseau had once deliberately forfeited a royal pension, and congratulated himself on having thus preserved his moral independence,<sup>381</sup> Shelley’s praise of those who refuse to participate in the established power-nexus comes over much to the credit of the maligned citizen of

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little good for his ideological credibility.

<sup>381</sup> *Confessions*, p. 371:

I would, it was true, be losing the pension, [...] but I would be escaping, too, the yoke that this would have imposed upon me. Was I to bid farewell to truth, to liberty, to courage? Would I ever again dare to speak of to speak of independence and disinterestedness? Once I accepted this pension, I would either have to flatter or remain silent.



Geneva.

Shelley's commentary on the failure of revolutionary 'imperfect attempts' is a discourse after the fashion of his specific comments on the failure of the French Revolution in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna*: less an apology for the Terror than an implicit admonishment that the revolutionaries had attempted institutional reform before ensuring that the French people were in a moral and spiritual condition to accept the establishment of a utopian system.<sup>382</sup> The same case applies to the founding of institutional Christianity: 'The system of equality which they established, necessarily fell to the ground, because it is a system which must result from, rather than precede the moral improvement of human kind.' (p. 270) Their cause may have been worthy and have produced important lessons for future reformers, but the most important of these is to ensure that moral and spiritual improvements precede political activism in any modern revolution, in order to prevent history repeating itself in another débâcle of bold but ill-considered idealism.

A personal trait of Rousseau's Saint-Preux is the desire to reform the morals of others without putting his own house in order: in particular, the soldiers with whom he keeps company for this very reason, and who end up involving him, more or less willingly (they get him drunk), in the brothel encounter (*Julie*, pp. 221-3).<sup>383</sup> The unavoidable implication of Saint-Preux's failure to qualify as a reformer is that Rousseau considered himself unfitted for this role, as was almost certainly the case in the egotistic and disillusioned later years of his *Reveries*. He had, however, unmistakably attempted this role in *Émile*, and in Book V had proven the point as far as Shelley was concerned: in attempting to argue for a general programme of feminine education without having carefully analysed his own emotions and motives, Rousseau (perhaps somewhat inadvertently)

<sup>382</sup> Cf. Preface to *Laon and Cythna*, *POS*, p. 35:

It has ceased to be believed, that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery, because a nation of men who had been dupes and slaves for centuries, were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquillity of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened. [...] The French Revolution may be considered as one of those manifestations of a general state of feeling among civilized mankind, produced by a defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement, or gradual abolition of political institutions.

<sup>383</sup> See Julie's comment on this, in *Julie*, p. 222: '[...] you ought to meddle with reforming others only when you have nothing left to reform in yourself.'

produced a manual of voyeurism and exploitation which could only serve to hold back the cause of moral and material reform. Even from within the generous allowances of *On Christianity*, Rousseau could not emerge without incurring some tacit criticism.

Turning to ‘The Triumph of Life’, and the procession of ‘hoary anarchs, demagogue [Voltaire] and sage [Kant]’ (‘The Triumph of Life’, 237) firmly chained to the car of ‘Life’ (defined as rampant materialism, egotism, and no regard or seriously defective regard for spiritual aspirations), the presence of Rousseau by the wayside is yet another implicit compliment of Shelley’s. Whatever the extent of his personal failure, Rousseau is spared the badge of allegiance with the chained ‘anarchs’, among whom is Napoleon, epitomising the collapse of French revolutionary idealism (215-27). This, at all events, represents a retraction of Shelley’s conventional 1812 accusation, in accord with *Childe Harold* III, that Rousseau held responsibility for both the Revolution and its degeneration.<sup>384</sup> In the ‘The Triumph of Life’ Rousseau is very much an exaggeration of a figure after his own heart: the outsider of the *Reveries*. Nevertheless, he remains the ‘blasted tree’ of *Childe Harold* in appearance, consumed by the fire of his own passions, which is an appropriate reflection of the masochistic, self-consuming figure which he depicts himself as in the *Reveries*. Taking into account the Petrarchan origins of the ‘The Triumph of Life’, the decayed Rousseau is also akin to the lover of the *Trionfi*, who could be taken as a prototype for the generic figure of the lover decayed by morbid passion. Such decay may be variously interpreted as being representative of venereal disease, or simply as a foretaste of the death and decay such figures impel

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<sup>384</sup> I am here at odds with Edward Duffy’s conclusions in *Rousseau in England*, p. 132:

Historically, the poem assumes the commonplace that Rousseau is to be placed at the imaginative source of the French Revolution and then goes on to describe the failure of the revolution as a consequence of Rousseau’s prototypical apostasy from imaginative vision [...].

Although Rousseau of ‘The Triumph of Life’ concedes that ‘my words were seeds of misery’ (280), the poet/observer immediately leaps to his defence with the assertion that any ‘misery’ spread by Rousseau does not compare to the ‘plague of blood and gold’ spread by the Roman Empire and its successors in the Roman Catholic church (281-92), which had been respectively paralleled with the *Ancien Régime* and post-Revolutionary France in *On Christianity*. Although ‘The Triumph of Life’ does not explicitly deny Rousseau’s conventional status as a corrupting influence, I believe that it nevertheless implicitly attempts to dissociate him from the imputation of having been a major cause of political tyranny, the true dedicated servants of which have all been chained to the car (whereas Rousseau has only been ‘among the multitude [...] swept’ (460-1)) Though Shelley judges Rousseau to be a slave to his own passions, he does not rank him politically among the (synonymous) tyrants and slaves..

themselves towards. Like the burning tree that Rousseau was (his persona in the ‘The Triumph of Life’ being decidedly burnt-out), Petrarch’s lover, according to Laura, ‘burns, not loves!’<sup>385</sup> Caught in the ‘yoke’<sup>386</sup> of Love’s ‘fiery chariot’ (*Triumphs*, p. 291), amidst a chaotic scene of Love’s captured, maimed, and dead victims, he ‘changed [his] looks and hair, before [his] age’ (308), in the fashion of the ‘Alastor’ poet, Laon, and Keats’s knight-at-arms (‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’). What the world represents as Love, and what Laura – the ‘ideal beauty’ of Petrarch’s scheme<sup>387</sup> – dismisses as the ‘corrosive acid’ of *Julie*, is thus set out at grim length:

It pleased him, whom th’ vulgar honor so,  
 To triumph over me; and now I know  
 What miserable servitude they prove,  
 What ruin, and what death, that fall in love.  
 Errors, dreams, paleness waiteth on his chair,  
 False fancies o’er the door, and on the stair  
 Are slippery hopes, unprofitable gain,  
 And gainful loss; [...]  
 [...] glorious disgrace;  
 [...]  
 A prison whose wide ways do all receive, (ibid.)

‘Glorious disgrace’ anticipates Byron’s naming of sexual love as a ‘sweet degradation’, the

<sup>385</sup> From ‘The Triumph of Death’, in *The Sonnets, Triumphs, and other Poems of Petrarch*, trans. Macgregor (New York: Hurst & Co., 1888[?]), pp. 315-24 (p. 321).

<sup>386</sup> From ‘The Triumph of Love’, in *Poems of Petrarch*, trans. Anna Hume, pp. 291-308 (p. 308).

<sup>387</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the ‘biography’ of Rousseau’s Saint-Preux shares a similar structure to the defining love-affairs in the lives of Petrarch and Dante: Julie, Laura, and Beatrice are all set up by their lovers as high Platonic ideal forms, become physically unattainable to the lovers through their marriages, then doubly so through their deaths. The obsessive behaviour of Petrarch towards Laura (cf. *Poems of Petrarch*, pp. 7-19) bears more resemblance to Saint-Preux’s excesses than the more respectful and sympathetic conduct attributed to Dante (Sayer’s introduction to *Hell*, pp. 26-7).

pleasure of which – primarily amounting to the cessation of the pains of lust – seems not worth the price of acquiring, whilst the ‘Errors, dreams’ and ‘False fancies’ look ahead to Young Werther, Saint-Preux, and the ‘Alastor’ poet: the wilful supposition that a cherished passion is compatible with one’s higher aspirations, and not an overpowering inclination to sensuality. The Platonic significance of the prison of the flesh, reflected in the captive processions of Petrarch and Shelley, and the punishment-cells of *Hell* and *Purgatory*, requires no elaboration, suffice to mention that the ‘dead’ Laura makes the analogy quite explicit: ‘Death to the good a dreary prison opens,/ But to the vile and base, who all their hopes/ And cares below have fix’d, is full of fear’ (p. 320), recalling the carnally-obsessed spirits of the *Phaedo* who failed to get ‘clear away’ from their cherished physical forms and became graveyard apparitions (*Last Days of Socrates*, pp. 133-4). In life the body is a prison to the spirit, and in death a sepulchre to the unenlightened spirit, although Laura’s judgement upon her lover seems more morbid still: ‘you indeed/ Are dead’ (*Triumphs*, p. 320), anticipating Beatrice Cenci in determining that worldly life itself is death, then asserting that only those who learn to abjure ‘the flesh and vile world’s power’ (ibid.) will ever escape to true life.

Thus, notwithstanding Petrarch’s avoidance of a conventional medieval representation for his ‘Triumph of Death’, Shelley’s ironic choice of representation for ‘The Triumph of Life’ takes its cue from Petrarch’s version.<sup>388</sup> Life and Death, within the worldly scheme of things, are virtually synonymous, as the dark and shapeless manifestation in Shelley’s triumphal chariot (‘The Triumph

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<sup>388</sup> See *The Gender of Death*, pp. 69-70:

Petrarch was familiar with the classical chariot of triumph but he only used it for Love triumphing over the World, not for the Triumph of Death. Nonetheless, countless miniatures, frescoes, cassoni, ceramics, engravings, fayences, gobelins, and stained-glass windows presented Petrarch’s Triumph of Dead [...] as a long-haired woman, usually wielding a scythe (rather than carrying a banner as in the poem), standing triumphantly on her chariot whose wheels crush the bodies of the living and the dead.

Shelley’s interest in such medieval imagery is also demonstrated in ‘The Mask of Anarchy’, representing the Peterloo Massacre as a grotesque Triumph of Death (conventionally depicted, but named ‘Anarchy’). ‘Over English land he passed,/ Trampling to a mire of blood/ The adoring multitude.’ (‘Mask of Anarchy’, 39-41) Gillray also used a medieval Triumph of Death to depict William Pitt trampling over the Radicals in *Presages of the Millenium* (1795). Cf. *Preface to Shelley*, pp. 46-8. The links thus established between the Gothic and grotesque, contemporary political media, and medieval art convention including the great Italian poets, suggests compelling reasons why Shelley never held true to his 1812 resolution to abandon the Gothic.

of Life', 87-93) – echoing Milton's shadowy figure of Death<sup>389</sup> – draws attention to. As Shelley depicts, in particularly morbid fashion in *The Cenci* and 'Invocation to Misery', the selfish and the sensual are addicted to death, and their life is nothing more than the process of acquiring it. 'The Triumph of Life' thus becomes the Dance of Death, as tempest-tossed Dantean lovers,<sup>390</sup> 'tortured by the agonizing pleasure' (143) of their sadomasochistic passions, collapse beneath the wheels of Life's careering chariot, emerging on the other side, beyond redemption, as a grotesque collection of decayed, aged figures.<sup>391</sup> In another macabre scene fit to be illustrated by Gillray, these emaciated sensualists continue to perform, or rather to parody, the frenzied Dionysian dance of the young figures, until the shadow-phantoms manifested by their morbid desires (a Gothic variation of Plato's shadows in the sunless cave,<sup>392</sup> projected by artificial light, as the chariot of Life obscures the sun with its attendant 'cold glare') finally overpower them and sink them into 'dust' and 'corruption' ('The Triumph of Life', 77-79, 164-75).

In creating this scene of decay and derangement, Shelley draws upon a similar 'triumph' in *The Faerie Queene* (I. iv), as Baker has noted at length.<sup>393</sup> Another possible (though unconfirmed) influence, of an even closer nature as regards gruesome and violent choreography, is the pageant of Juggernaut in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, beneath which:

<sup>389</sup> *Paradise Lost*, Book II, 666-73.

<sup>390</sup> As in the black wind of *Hell*, Canto V.

<sup>391</sup> Much as I would like to excuse Shelley from the accusation of ageism in this late work, there is no avoiding this conclusion in Laon's declaration to Othman, 'Ye cannot change, since ye are old and grey,/ And ye have chosen your lot' (*Laon and Cythna*, X, 4406-7), and one cannot help but also notice the bad press which old age receives throughout *The Cenci*. One might attempt to explain this apparent prejudice as having resulted from such factors as Shelley's lifelong estrangement from his father, and his eventual disillusionment with most of the old school of Romantic authors, including Godwin, Southey, and Wordsworth. At all events, the significance of this violent 'ageing process' in the 'The Triumph of Life' appears to be that having persisted in sensuality to the point where they were no longer even physically capable of it, the worldly lovers have become likewise spiritually degraded, and like Count Cenci and Othman, are finally incapable of assimilating any salutary spiritual counsel. Symbolically, one cannot be saved from the wheels of the chariot that just ran you over.

<sup>392</sup> *Republic*, pp. 316-25.

<sup>393</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 260, n. 5:

A similar wildness is discernible in the throngs which surround the coach of Lucifera (Worldly Pride), one of whose ministers is Lust, in *The Faerie Queene*. [...] The old obscene people in Shelley who fall behind the chariot of Worldly Life are paralleled in Spenser by those who have gone to Lucifera's castle and come out badly. They lie "by the hedges" along the highway in "balefull beggerie or foule disgrace" like "loathsome lazars." (*F.Q.*, I, iv, 3.)

multitudes rushed [...] to prostrate themselves under the wheels of the enormous machine, which crushed them to atoms in a moment, and passed on. [...] this singular union of instability and splendour, of trembling decadence and terrific glory, gave a faithful image of the meretricious exterior, and internal hollowness, of idolatrous religion.<sup>394</sup>

The chaotic, unregulated motion of Life's chariot is echoed in the unbalanced image of Juggernaut, although Maturin chooses to explain the significance of his imagery in plain words. Ironically, Shelley's chariot lacks even a 'meretricious exterior': it appears as malevolent as it proves, like the deathlike apparition of 'Anarchy', which does not deter the 'adoring multitude' from placing themselves in its fatal path. One might interpret this as an instance of Petrarchan, and even Rousseauan honesty: Petrarch's lover and Saint-Preux are both aware of the painful and unprofitable nature of the passions they devote themselves to, and are only dissuaded from them with the greatest of difficulty. This addiction, or death-drive, is compulsive.<sup>395</sup>

'Now canst thou see how wholly those are blind/  
To truth, who think all love is laudable/  
Just in itself, no matter of what kind,/  
Since (they would argue) its material/  
Seems always good'  
(*Purgatory*, XVIII, 34-7) declares Dante's Virgil, for which Rousseau's Saint-Preux would doubtless have accused him of blasphemy. Lovers in Romantic literature are certainly not most

<sup>394</sup> *Melmoth*, pp. 292-3. This is an extremely speculative influence, since the Juggernaut image was known to Shelley before the 1820 publication of *Melmoth* [...]. 'The Mask of Anarchy', with its 'adoring' victims trampled under Anarchy's horse, is clearly a variation of this. Also see *Queen Mab*, V, 53-60:

Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,  
The signet of its all-enslaving power  
Upon a shining ore, and called it gold:  
Before whose image bow the vulgar great,  
The vainly rich, the miserable proud,  
The mob of peasants, nobles, priests, and kings,  
And with blind feelings reverence the power  
That grinds them to the dust of misery.

<sup>395</sup> Although Maturin's concern is to represent false religion, he evidently shares Shelley's interest in sexual perversion as being at the psychological centre of evil, evidenced by the 'boy seated on the front of the moving temple, who 'perfected the praise of the loathsome idol, with all the outrageous lubricities of the Phallic worship.' (*Melmoth*, p. 293) Auto-erotism is, indeed, a good image for the mental condition of many Shelleyan antiheroes, not to mention Saint-Preux, and, though his self-confessed sexual fantasies, Saint-Preux's author.

famed for carefully questioning the nature of their guiding passions, although those of Shelley who make that omission are frequently dealt acts of retribution infernal (i.e. Verezzi, who possibly falls to Hell, and almost certainly to oblivion) and Purgatorial (Laon chained to the column, among others), and ‘The Triumph of Life’ was not the first time he had turned to Dante to authorise his anxieties.<sup>396</sup> I have stated in relation to ‘Alastor’ the significance of the dream of the siren on the Cornice of Sloth in *Purgatory*. Rousseau, as a creator of ‘devouring’ egotistical fantasies who consciously rejects human community, certainly falls within the scope of Dante’s warning, which constantly repudiates human illusions of self-sufficiency. In *Hell*, criminals and traitors who rejected society (as sustaining communality, rather than corrupt mutual exploitation) are placed in a far deeper isolation than the lustful and gluttonous, who held false ideas of what society should constitute. In *Purgatory*, the proud and the envious receive a longer detention from salvation than the merely sensual sinners. It is therefore conceivable that the visionary experience undergone by the Rousseau of ‘The Triumph of Life’ (308-411) is modelled upon the same encounter with the ‘false Beatrice’ as ‘Alastor’ draws upon, which would certainly find support in Rousseau’s own claim that he never found mutual love except within the domains of his own ego.

Rousseau’s encounter, in his symbolic youth,<sup>397</sup> with the feminine ‘shape all light’ (352) has been variously interpreted, the apparition having been deemed a highly auspicious, Beatricean figure by Baker,<sup>398</sup> next of kin to Life-in-Death by Robinson<sup>399</sup> (and also, by association, the

<sup>396</sup> The letter of 4 October 1814 concerning his first marriage (‘Lay down all hope’) to Thomas Jefferson Hogg affords a somewhat more self-interested example.

<sup>397</sup> ‘In the April prime’ (308) when his spirit first enters into Shelley’s allegorical dimension.

<sup>398</sup> *Shelley’s Major Poetry*, p. 267:

It has sometimes been quite wrongly supposed that the Iris-figure is intended to be a figure with evil connotations. Thus she is said to blot out “the thoughts of him” who watches her swift movement, and one by one to trample them out, like sparks or embers, into “the dust of death.” But from what follows it is plain that these are dark and evil thoughts, not thoughts in general, for her action is compared to that of day “upon the threshold of the east” treading out the lamps of night.

<sup>399</sup> See Charles E Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 225:

[...] Iris does serve Life-in-Death when she draws “ ‘her many coloured scarf’ ” before the “ ‘shape all light’ ” [...] who entralls Rousseau and then offers him the cup of Nepenthe; *and* when she builds with “ ‘vermilion/ And green & azure plumes’ ” the “ ‘moving arch of victory’ ” [...] over the “ ‘cold bright car’ ” of “ ‘cold light, whose airs too soon deform’ ” Rousseau [...]. Iris is thus used by Shelley to equate the enchanting “ ‘fair shape’ ” [...] of Life (the “ ‘shape all light’ ”) with the deforming foul shape of

‘Alastor’ apparition), and a figure of ambivalent moral significance by Crook and Guiton.<sup>400</sup> The complex web of literary associations comprising a great deal of ‘The Triumph of Life’ creates no small degree of ambiguity, and Crook and Guiton are probably quite correct in assuming intentional multiple interpretations of the ‘shape all light’. Notwithstanding the clear correspondence between Shelley’s creation and the Lady of *Purgatory*’s Earthly Paradise,<sup>401</sup> she also bears a less-than-auspicious resemblance to Spenser’s *Lucifera* – the ‘mayden Queene’ (*Faerie Queene*, I, IV, 8) conspicuously missing from Shelley’s Juggernaut of false devotion. The congregation of ‘Life’ – like Dante’s damned, all devoted sado-masochists<sup>402</sup> – are willing to worship Death in its naked form. Rousseau, upon his emergence into the dream-world, is not so degraded, and it could be argued that Spenser’s splendid illusion has been reserved for his destruction. We may recall the Preface to ‘Alastor’:

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Death (the “ ‘cold light’ ”) [...].

<sup>400</sup> *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, pp. 222-3:

In lines 411-23 she is associated with Lucifer, the Morning Star, the planet Venus, [...]. These two sources of light, the Sun, symbolising ‘Passion’s golden purity’, and the Morning Star, symbolising the ideal passions of the mind, contain the essential elements of Shelley’s definition of Love as a ‘universal thirst for a communion not merely of the senses, but of our whole nature; intellectual, imaginative and sensitive’ [From ‘A Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks [...]’, *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 408]. It is from the sun, however, that the Shape derives a ‘fierce splendour’ (359). This makes her, as Butter points out, not only beautiful but dangerous. She can be Pandemos or Urania, depending upon the experience and wisdom of the person to whom she offers her cup.

<sup>401</sup> *Purgatory*, XXXI: the Lady (Matilda) immerses the repentant Dante in the stream of Lethe to eradicate the spiritual pain of his past sins in preparation for the ascent to Paradise. The ‘gentle rivulet’ of Rousseau’s vision in ‘The Triumph of Life’ has distinctly Lethean properties, obliterating the memory of ‘All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love’ (314-35). If this sounds somewhat unappealing, it should be borne in mind that what the ‘fallen’ Rousseau names as ‘love’ and ‘pleasure’ are most probably the opinions of the degraded ‘multitude’, and not the Uranian ideal. Since this vision represents an essentially pre-lapsarian experience – from Rousseau’s early, hopeful, benevolent years, to his personally disastrous entry into society, and resultant depravity and misanthropy – it is appropriate that his symbolic birthplace and scene of youth should resemble the Earthly Paradise (cf. *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 221). The ‘chrystal glass/ Mantling with bright Nepenthe’ (358-9) carried by the ‘shape all light’ is another variation of the Lethe theme. Also see *Faerie Queene*, IV, III, 42-5, from where this image derives.

<sup>402</sup> See *Hell*, III, 121-6 and note:

All those that die beneath God’s righteous ire  
From every country come here every one.

They press to pass the river, for the fire  
Of heavenly justice stings and spurs them so  
That all their fear is changed into desire [...]

[...] This is another of the important passages in which Dante emphasizes that Hell is the soul’s choice. The damned fear it and long for it, as in this life a man may hate the sin which makes him miserable, and yet obstinately seek and wallow in it.



[...] that Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction [...] dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meaner spirits that dare to abjure its dominion. [...] They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, [...] (PP, p. 69)

Shelley's 'selfish, blind, and torpid' multitudes are clearly portrayed in 'The Triumph of Life', careering along with their hideous idol of chaos and futility. At all events, Rousseau's place – as a 'deluded' luminary – is not with them, and in spite of his fall and decay, he has escaped to the wayside ('The Triumph of Life', 540-3) rather than sharing in their common destruction. This has positive and negative implications: although Rousseau's fate is obviously more enviable than the mass of decayed dancers who remain in the vanguard and are reduced to a mass of 'corruption', the fact of his escape indicates that 'most shadows past' from his form during the time he was in the pageant, 'And least of strength and beauty did abide' (542-3). In other words, Rousseau, during his brief time in urban life, proved a more adept practitioner of social vices and sensuality than those doomed to linger in that atmosphere for their whole lives, and thus blighted his image for the whole of posterity. The effect of this has, however, caused him to revolt and withdraw from this valley of shadows<sup>403</sup> – reduced to a hideous caricature of his aged self as portrayed in the *Reveries*<sup>404</sup> – but

<sup>403</sup> Bearing in mind the details of the crushing chariot-wheels and the deadly shadows (representing both the emptiness of worldly gains, and the dangers attendant upon them), it is most interesting to note how Rousseau describes the process of his disillusionment from society. *Reveries*, pp. 56-7:

All the time when, untroubled in my innocence, I imagined that men felt nothing but benevolence and respect towards me and opened my frank and trusting heart to my friends and brothers, the traitors were silently ensnaring me in traps forged in the depths of hell. Taken unawares by this most unforeseen of misfortunes, the most terrible there is for a proud soul, trampled in the mire without knowing why or by whom, dragged into a pit of ignominy, enveloped in a horrible darkness through which I could make out nothing but sinister apparitions, I was overwhelmed by the first shock, and I should never have recovered from the prostration into which I was cast by the unexpectedness of this catastrophe, if I had not previously prepared the support I needed to struggle to my feet again.

<sup>404</sup> The highly allusive 'dead tree' caricature of Rousseau – again, the type of portrayal one would expect from a Gillray print (which sometimes borrow, or parody devices from art and literature) – combines many possible influences: the self-confessed 'old dotard' of the *Reveries* (p. 106); the blasted tree Rousseau of *Childe Harold*; the

redemption may not be impossible. Nevertheless, he stands in no more certainty of this than the ‘Alastor’ poet, with whom his visionary experience bears an undeniable similarity.

The apparition of Rousseau’s vision, like that of ‘Alastor’<sup>405</sup> and *Lucifera*, appears in a ‘fierce splendour’ (359) of sunlight, reflected from the Lethean ‘waters’ (343-57). Her status as a reflection, notwithstanding the presence of a possibly Platonic cave and the aforementioned shadows, is by no means a bad thing in itself. Rousseau, symbolically born, emerges from this cave<sup>406</sup> into a tranquil ‘scene of woods and waters’ (336), to encounter a reflection of absolute beauty – represented (as in the corresponding allegory of the *Republic*<sup>407</sup>) by the sun, which the ‘cold glare’ of Life’s chariot will obscure. Rousseau is thus offered the choice of pursuing the ascent to absolute beauty – the long but metaphorically rewarding process of learning to look the sun full in its face. Unfortunately for him, he is engrossed (hinting at ‘enamoured’ (367)) in looking at the lady, who is clearly an object of sensual fascination to him (359-81), the dubious nature of which is betrayed in the sentiments it inspires: ‘desire and shame’ (394). The possibility of this ambivalence between two egotistic extremes – indulgence and total self-denial (neither of which Shelley advocates on its own merits) – resolving into the sympathetic, pseudo-Platonic, moderate attitude to

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souls of the suicides in *Hell*, transformed into trees (canto XIII. Shelley’s Rousseau is effectively a spiritual suicide); the victims of Duessa (false religion) in Spenser, also transformed into trees (*Faerie Queene*, I, III, 30-44); and Milton’s Death, described as a ‘grim feature’ at *Paradise Lost*, X, 279 (as Rousseau is at ‘The Triumph of Life’, 190).

<sup>405</sup> ‘Alastor’, 161-3: ‘Soon the solemn mood/ Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame/ A permeating fire [...]’. We are later reminded that self-consuming fire is all too easily mistaken for ‘ethereal flame’. Cf. 250-4: ‘[...] his listless hand/ Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;/ Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone/ As in a furnace burning secretly/ From his dark eyes alone.’

<sup>406</sup> I infer this from ‘In found myself asleep/ Under a mountain, which from unknown time/ Had yawned into a cavern high and deep’ (‘The Triumph of Life’, 311-3).

<sup>407</sup> *Republic*, pp. 318-9 for the allegory of the cave-dweller brought out into the daylight:

Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. [...] he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave. First he would find it easier to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at [sic.] the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night, and to look at the light of the moon and stars [...]. The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself, and gaze at it without using reflections in water or any other medium, but as it is in itself. [...] Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see.

sexuality which Shelley advocates in the ‘Discourse...’ is undermined by the dream-Rousseau’s evident self-absorption, as he interrogates the ‘shape all light’ for self-knowledge of almost Faustian extent: ‘Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why’ (398).<sup>408</sup> He imagines his antitype as a passive spiritual reflection, through which he may find fulfilment without the need to apply to another living consciousness for guidance or sustenance.<sup>409</sup> Thus, like many other devotees of the egotistic sublime – Victor Frankenstein, the ‘Alastor’ poet, Laon, and (after his inimitable fashion) Count Cenci – he becomes self-consuming and remains unfulfilled. Without empathy, it seems, there are no answers, and without that Uranian sentiment as the super-ego – only one’s personal ‘shame’ to fall back on – even a strong disinclination to vice is inadequate to keep the repressed from returning as and when it pleases. The ‘creature,’ be it monstrous ‘daemon’<sup>410</sup> or apparition, only stands as testimony to the futility of its creator’s illusions of self-sufficiency. As Saint-Preux frequently demonstrates, if he never personally discovers it, without empathy there is no virtue, and there is nothing positive that the ‘shape all light’ can do for Rousseau without his necessary acceptance of self-insufficiency. Thus, the manifestation of intellectual beauty is converted to a deadly incarnation of Rousseau’s hubris. As in *Prometheus Unbound* (I, 380-1), ‘Evil minds/ Change good to their own nature.’

<sup>408</sup> Crook and Gupton interpret this incident somewhat more positively. I am swayed to a more sceptical analysis by what I consider to be the precedents in ‘Alastor’, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Frankenstein*, and *Faust*, among others. *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 223:

Rousseau addresses her ‘as one between desire and shame / Suspended’, an apt description of an adolescent taken unawares by the sexual impulse. ‘Desire’ and ‘shame’ correspond to the unruly horse and the modest horse of Plato’s Phaedrus, ‘shame’ meaning modesty here. (Given the type of poem *The Triumph* is, ‘shame’ also looks forward to the disgrace and self-reproach which will overtake the unwitting Rousseau.) ‘Suspended’ indicates that this is the moment of balance, [...] He is now thirsting for an experience which will satisfy his whole nature – sensual, imaginative and intellectual – believing that this will reveal to him the secret of existence.

<sup>409</sup> This is very much the pattern of love as ego-projection which Shelley describes in ‘On Love’ and depicts in ‘Alastor’, but it is not the Platonic love which he clearly advocates and idealises in the ‘Discourse...’, *Laon and Cythna*, ‘Rosalind and Helen’, *Adonais*, and elsewhere.

<sup>410</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 99. It is interesting that Frankenstein chooses to call his creature after the same name that Plato assigns to Love in its essential form as desire: ‘daemon’ (i.e. An intermediate spirit between gods and men. *Symposium*, p. 21). This could be taken as confirmation that the creature, in its deformity, guilt, and solitude, externalises the futile personal results of Frankenstein’s Rousseau-like efforts to find fulfilment by withdrawing into his own ego. Like the shadows of ‘The Triumph of Life’, the decaying Cythna of Laon’s dream, the souls of Dante’s *Hell*, Roderick Usher’s ‘revived’ sister, and Dorian Gray’s picture, the necrotic creature (which has the skin texture of a ‘mummy’. p. 218) gives form to the morbid, and self-destructive psyche, which Shelley attributed to Rousseau (as Rousseau sometimes did to himself).

Lucifera – Spenser’s anthropomorphism of pride – is next of kin to the ‘Alastor’ vision: her appearance is of beauty and splendour, but her apparently ‘ethereal flame’ is associated with destruction and self-destruction, with reference to the Phœbus legend (*Faerie Queene*, I, IV, 8-9). In spite of her ‘disdayne’ (10) for earth and her heaven-gazing stance, ‘Of griesly *Pluto* she the daughter was,/ And sad *Proserpina* the Queene of hell;’ (11) which does not inspire much confidence in her appropriateness as an object of worship. Self-devotion and death-devotion are as one, however high one presumes to aspire through the former.

Lucifera bears a mirror rather than a cup, but the ‘dreadfull Dragon’ (*Faerie Queene*, I, IV, 10) at the feet of this purple-clad false idol (16), in the context of Spenser’s Christian allegory, conjures associations with Revelation, chapters 12, 13, and 17, establishing the unholy alliance against God’s people, of the dragon (Satan), the beast (Caesar Nero; also the Roman Empire), and ‘Babylon the great, the mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth’ (Rev. 17. 5, Cf. *Oxford Study Bible*, p. 1570. This apparition represents Rome itself, and more generally materialism and false worship), who rides upon the latter beast, although beast and dragon are more or less inextricably equated.<sup>411</sup> The faithful, perhaps significantly in light of this study, are represented as ‘a woman robed with the sun, beneath her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.’ (Rev. 12. 1, p. 1566) These celestial details are in sharp contrast to the materialism and sensuality of ‘Babylon the great’, who, ‘clothed in purple and scarlet’, holding a ‘gold cup full of obscenities and the foulness of her fornication’, and ‘drunk with the blood of God’s people’ (Rev. 17. 4-6, p. 1570), stands as an early but spectacular prototype of the pseudo-vampire.

The fact that this biblical ‘Life-in-Death’ signifies in a major sense the very spirit of a decadent commercial and imperial civilisation marks her as a prototype of Shelley’s deformed, lust-engendering apparition of ‘Life’ in its lowest forms. Significantly, the dragon, the beast, and Babylon all reappear in the anti-masque of *Purgatory*, XXXII, 130-60, now representing the corrupt state of the papacy in Dante’s time, which Shelley also condemns in ‘On Christianity’, with the

<sup>411</sup> Both creatures have ‘seven heads and ten horns’. *Oxford Study Bible*, pp. 1566-7, 1570 (Rev. 12: 3, 13: 1, 17: 3).

inference that this relapse into corruption is comparable to the failure of the French Revolution. Shelley reinforces this sense of historical recursion by placing among the triumphal captives the representatives of the *Ancien Régime* and other recent examples of feudal tyranny ('The Triumph of Life', 234-8). Other captives include Napoleon (215-27) to represent the Revolution becoming as decadent as the *Ancien Régime*; the Roman emperors ('heirs/ Of Caesar's crime'; 284); and the papacy (288-92) whom Shelley considered as the successors to the Roman Empire's corruption. In an updated version of the apocalyptic dream-vision,<sup>412</sup> the modern and ancient world are banded together in worship of 'Babylon the great', but in true Shelleyan style, she appears in a condition as dead and deformed as her devotees inevitably become, in body and soul.<sup>413</sup>

The 'hoary anarchs', materialistic reasoners, and loveless multitudes are apparently content to worship this appalling deity in its undisguised form. By contrast, Shelley's Rousseau is not, but the form of ideal beauty he would instead aspire to worship is spiritually alien to his 'voluptuous' and egotistic psyche. The 'shape all light' is, insofar as she can be attributed an independent morality, essentially blameless for the resultant downfall of Rousseau, who mistakenly assumes her divinity and omniscience (395-9). Taking everything into account – her associations with the natural scene, Plato's allegory of the cave-dwellers, and her counterpart of *Purgatory* – it seems most likely that she is merely an indeterminate 'daemon': Love indeed, but of no fixed nature. One may well assume that had Rousseau approached her with more of enthusiasm and less of 'desire', 'shame', and evident mistrust, he would have been granted a genuine draught of 'Lethean' (463) waters, surrendering all morbid worldly illusions and the guilt of sins committed whilst under such illusions.<sup>414</sup> If not instantly transporting him to the same domain that had received the few

<sup>412</sup> Bearing in mind that Revelation itself borrows the image of the city-whore from Ezekiel 16. 23 (where it stands for a corrupt Jerusalem) and adapts it for contemporary effect.

<sup>413</sup> *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, 211: 'Life in the fullness of time is seen no longer as a poisonously beautiful seductress but as a raddled old harlot whose shrouds fail to conceal the marks of her trade.'

<sup>414</sup> Based upon *Purgatory*, XXXI, where Dante, first brought to a complete and traumatic realisation and confession of his past state of sin, and is then mercifully released of it by the waters of Lethe. The memory is restored without guilt or pain in XXXIII, and he is ready for the ascent to Paradise. This invites obvious comparison with Cythna's recommendation for an enlightened attitude (cf. n. 29).

surpassing, fearless souls who had completely avoided ‘The Triumph of Life’,<sup>415</sup> this would assuredly have set him on the correct path for the ascent to absolute beauty. Instead, he is actually protective of his worldly illusions, equating them with his essential identity<sup>416</sup> (whilst the actual Rousseau had strenuously attempted to pass them off as the proper motivators of nature and society in *Émile V*). The description he gives of the shape’s Lethean actions is laced with a tone of Gothic horror which would be better applied to the death-masque of Life:

And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune  
 To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot  
 The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

All that was seemed as if it had been not,  
 As if the gazer’s mind was strewn beneath  
 Her feet like embers, and she, thought be thought,

Trampled its fires into the dust of death,  
 As day upon the threshold of the east  
 Treads out the lamps of night, [...] (382-90)

Bearing in mind that the chariot of Life obscures the sun of intellectual beauty, the action of an apparent embodiment of day extinguishing ‘the lamps of night’ is unlikely to signify anything

<sup>415</sup> [...] the sacred few who could not tame/ Their spirits to the Conqueror’ are a select group indeed, Socrates and Jesus being the only certain members: cf. ‘The Triumph of Life’, 128-37, 254-5. Dante, however, although mentioned prominently in the poem (471-6), is not pointed out as a member of the pageant.

<sup>416</sup> *Rousseau in England*:

[...] if Rousseau speaks with rapture about the effects of the stream, it is with terror that he recoils from the dancing feet of the lady. A fearful rationalist, he trembles before a devil of destruction when he should be welcoming what he himself has described as an angel of deliverance. (p. 121)

Trembling lest the lady trample out the light of his mind, he acts like a hoarder of that light. (p. 128)

but a salutary effect. Nevertheless, Rousseau's horrified response is to glorify the passionate 'fires' of his mind, leading to a quick recantation of 'the lamps of night' statement: they are renamed as 'heaven's living eyes' (392). This is Rousseau as Saint-Preux, wilfully interpreting his passions as a heaven-sent guiding genius, and resisting all philosophy which appears to suggest that powerful, sensual emotions are only obscuring 'shadows between Man and god' (289). Having observed the 'fierce and obscene' (137) dance of Life's mass of worshippers, creating a destructive horde of such shadows, we already know this to be the case.

The surrender of illusion being a voluntary action (by Dante's example: cf. n. 68), Rousseau cannot begin the ascent to absolute beauty, no more than he can behold earthly beauty without the taint of sensuality. Thus, at the moment of critical choice, the 'daemon' takes on the nature of Pandemian love, and the cup which her unsympathetic 'lover' drains takes on the nature of Babylon's gold cup, albeit with effects which parody those of Lethe: 'my brain became as sand/  
Where the first wave had more than half erased/  
The track of deer on desert Labrador,/ Whilst the  
fierce wolf from which they fled amazed/  
Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore' (405-9). Balancing the positive associations of the deer<sup>417</sup> against the solitary and predatory nature of the wolf<sup>418</sup> – recalling such predators as the 'hyaena lust' and 'dark serpents' of *Laon and Cythna* – it seems that the only consolation left to this fallen Rousseau is the hope that 'more than half erased' does not mean 'entirely erased'. Shelley at least allows for this possibility, Rousseau not being ranked by him among the devotedly Pandemian multitudes: a poet and 'luminary', deluded into worldly corruption by a 'generous error' rather than an active desire to exploit his fellow-beings, is not considered as being wholly beyond redemption. Nevertheless, his degrading surrender is in the meantime heralded by a glorious spectacle of parody, as the rainbow that had previously adorned

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<sup>417</sup> Passive, vegetarian, communal, and linked in *Adonais* with Shelley himself, in a somewhat self-pitying characterisation: 'A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart.' (297)

<sup>418</sup> It should probably be mentioned that this is an abominable choice of animal in the Dantean context, since the 'Sins of the wolf' which Dante encounters in the 'dark wood' of his middle age (*Hell*, I, XVIII-XXXIV, and illustrations on p. 180 and 264) are the sins of malicious fraud (representing the rampant corruption of social institutions) and the treasonous sins – the latter being the very depths of egotism, whose practitioners are appropriately buried in ice in the ninth circle of Hell.

the ‘shape all light’ (436-7) in its potentially beneficial aspect – the personification of love and natural beauty – becomes ‘a moving arch of victory’ (439) for the depraved, dystopic pageant. Beauty is again enslaved to sensuality, whilst the mocking, superficial glory underlain by rampant and grotesque chaos again summons to mind the techniques of the satirical cartoonists of the period (an excellent example being the aforementioned ‘The Apotheosis of Hoche’). In spite of this ruthless image of the apparent victory of ‘sensuality and force’ over very nearly one hundred percent of the human race, notwithstanding the efforts of ‘Ariosto, Tasso, Shakespeare, Spenser’, never mind Rousseau himself, Shelley’s vision is not just an uncompromisingly pessimistic recantation of the hopes expressed in *A Defence of Poetry*.<sup>419</sup> For Rousseau in particular, we have adequate assurance that the quest for purpose and eternity has not been irrecoverably abandoned.

Duffy makes an interesting speculation that the fictional Rousseau’s surreal, embarrassing brush with intellectual beauty may be psychologically based upon Rousseau’s autobiography: specifically *The Confessions*, VII, where the young Rousseau visits the apartments of the Venetian prostitute Zulietta (pp. 309-13).<sup>420</sup> This leads to very little pleasure and much humiliation, due to Rousseau’s continual wavering between desire, disgust, and self-doubt (culminating in one point at his breaking down into tears). In a penetrating moment (admitting that this incident is a key to his personality) Rousseau describes himself effectively as a spiritual masochist, whose egotism renders him incapable of enjoying the pleasures which nature throws in his path. One may compare his

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<sup>419</sup> *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, pp. 226-7:

Rousseau joins the dance but this is not the end of his experience. And this leads us to consideration of whether the poem is ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’. On the one hand critics like Butter believe that ‘It offers no hope of an improvement in the human condition on the earth. Life is shown as almost inevitably corrupting; the only way to escape the contagion is, like Christ and Socrates, voluntarily to accept death.’ Others have seen the fragment as a prelude to a potential ‘Triumph of Love’. It has been pointed out that many of the features of this dance of death contain the potential for renewal – there is a flower-strewn path to which some dancers may find their way; the charioteer’s eyes may be unbandaged; from the old root a sapling may spring.

<sup>420</sup> *Rousseau in England*, pp. 136-7:

[...] I have discovered no factual or documentary link between Shelley and this specific episode of the *Confessions*, and the extent of my claim can only be that the intelligible content of Rousseau’s [sic.] self-revelation is identical with the analysis of Rousseau given in “The Triumph of Life.” Trying to characterize Rousseau, Shelley could have done worse than to take a hint from the self-recognitions of the man himself.



tentative approach to the ‘shape all light’ and her cup of nepenthe (which he ‘Touched with faint lips’ (404) in spite of having been offered to ‘quench thy thirst’ (400)) with the following:

Never were mortal heart and senses offered such sweet rapture. Ah, if only I could have tasted it, whole and complete, for a single moment!... I tasted it, but without delight. I blunted all its joys, I killed them, as though of my own accord. No, nature did not make me to know pleasure. She has filled my heart with an appetite for unutterable bliss, my perverse mind with the poison that destroys it. (p. 311)

Given the psychological centrality Rousseau assigns to this passage,<sup>421</sup> not to mention the terms of Rousseau’s self-accusation (‘I tasted it, but without delight’) I find Duffy’s claim highly persuasive. Shelley had memorably described prostitutes as ‘diseased and insensible’ in the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks...’, but the irony of Rousseau’s Venetian experience is his own self-willed insensibility: Rousseau intentionally suppresses all sympathies with his companion, withdraws into his ego, and allows himself to be overwhelmed by suspicions and social prejudices.<sup>422</sup> Zuletta may not seem very well qualified as a Beatrice or a Laura, but the genuine Uranian lover would still consider her to be deserving of sympathy. Not only does Rousseau self-defensively erect this spiritual barrier, but he persists in attempting (without success) to set in motion purely sexual relations with her, and tends to glorify this non-empathic sexual impulse in doing so: ‘[...] it had lain within my power to make the sweetest [moments] of my life,

<sup>421</sup> *Confessions*, p. 311: ‘Whoever you are, who aspire to know a fellow-man, read, if you dare, the two or three pages that follow; you are about to know in full J-J. Rousseau.’

<sup>422</sup> *Confessions*, pp. 311-2:

What I was saying to myself was this: this creature, which is mine to dispose of as I wish, is a masterpiece of nature and of love: mind, body, everything about her is perfect; she is as good and generous as she is amiable and lovely. Nobles and princes should be her slaves; sceptres should lie at her feet. Yet here she is, a miserable whore, a prey to all comers; the captain of a merchant-ship can do as he likes with her; she comes and throws herself at my head, who she knows has nothing, whose merit, even if she knew it, would mean nothing at all to her. There is something incomprehensible here. Either my own heart is deceiving me, bewitching my senses and letting me be duped by a worthless slut, or else she must have some secret defect, with I do not know about, but which destroys the effect of her charms and repels those who ought to be quarrelling over her.

[...] If I did not feel when I possessed her how much I loved her, I felt it cruelly when I lost her.' (*Confessions*, p. 313) Evidently, this passage was written in the same frame of mind Rousseau had already ruthlessly parodied in Saint-Preux: a man dangerously incapable of distinguishing between 'ethereal flame' and 'corrosive acid'. Social disillusionment aside, Rousseau at this stage is apparently not quite weary and sick with the Dance of Death. In the *Reveries*, however, in spite of his self/ soul-consuming misanthropy, he rejects such 'brief moments of madness and passion' (p. 87) and seems to accept a more Platonic form of pleasure in their place:

[...] the happiness for which my soul longs is not made up of fleeting moments, but of a single and lasting state, which has no very strong impact in itself, but which by its continuance becomes so captivating that we eventually come to regard it as the height of happiness. (pp. 87-8)

This is akin to the patient happiness of the lover of ideal beauty, which Shelley's Rousseau recoils from, as opposed to the violent fluctuations of keen desire and pleasurable relief falsely glorified by the Pandemian lover, and notably by Shelley's Rousseau. Regret follows swiftly, and in the midst of Life's pageant the dimly-perceived presence of intellectual beauty (the 'shape all light' as 'Lucifer';<sup>423</sup> 'The Triumph of Life', 414) 'Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.' (431) In describing his experience of life in civilised society, the actual Rousseau delivers a similar biography to the fictional (albeit with considerable focus on the supposed treachery of former friends):

I fell into all the pits that had been dug for me. Indignation, fury and frenzy took

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<sup>423</sup> Milton notwithstanding, this is an auspicious image. Cf. *Shelley's Venomed Melody*, p. 222:

In lines 411-23, she is associated with Lucifer, the Morning Star, the planet Venus, symbol in Shelley 'of love, or liberty, or wisdom, or beauty, or some other expression of that Intellectual Beauty which was to Shelley's mind the central power of the world'.

possession of me. I lost my bearings. My wits were unsettled, and in the horrible darkness in which they have kept me buried, I could see no light to guide me, no support or foothold to keep me upright [Bear in mind that Shelley's Rousseau is 'fallen by the way side' ('The Triumph of Life', 541)] and help me to resist the despair that was engulfing me. (*Reveries*, p. 125)

The Rousseau-caricature of 'The Triumph of Life' is found trapped in a purgatorial parody of his old age as depicted in the *Reveries*, almost fully recognising his past errors in both conduct and ideology, but still unwilling to accept that his determined egotism lay at their root. 'When I wrote my *Confessions* I was already old and disillusioned with the vain pleasures of life, all of which I had tasted and felt their emptiness in my heart.' (p. 76) In fiction as in life, apparently before his allegorical point of death,<sup>424</sup> Rousseau manages to extricate himself from the 'importunate crowd' who 'came between [him] and Nature.' As he explains, 'Only when I had detached myself from the social passions and their dismal train did I find her once again in all her beauty' (p. 134).

In fact, this presents a more hopeful development than Shelley's version, in which, even having left behind the 'dismal train' of worldly life, it does not appear that Rousseau has yet been able to re-establish contact with the 'shape all light' (who, among her other qualities, represents nature as a reflection of ideal beauty). Whether or not this would have come to pass, bearing in mind the fragmentary nature of the 'The Triumph of Life', we shall doubtless never discover. Nevertheless, we may observe that Shelley does not trample down all signifiers of beauty or – like the glass of nepenthe and the rainbow – transform them into mocking parodies of their proper

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<sup>424</sup> Shelley's Rousseau is certainly dead, judging from his own references to his 'real-world' death (199-200, 242), but this does not seem to be depicted in the allegorical action of the poem. The multitude of sensualists are clearly destroyed in the chariot's wake, but Rousseau escapes only half-destroyed, and this almost certainly represents his disillusionment and voluntary exile from worldly society. The posthumous prolongation of this state of petrified corruption may suggest (negatively) that his life was such a morbid exercise, that his death requires no perceptible alteration in his condition; or (positively), like the temporarily trapped souls of the *Phaedo*, that he must undergo a Purgatorial period before he can cease to identify with his much-abused physical form.

states. The beautiful surrounding scenes, although ignored by the morbid multitudes ('The Triumph of Life', 67-72), remain as a potential alternative to the barren 'public way' (43). The 'shape all light' fades, and is greatly obscured by the 'severe excess' (424) of the false light of Life, but is still 'dimly' (427) perceived. Thus, although establishing a new depth in Shelley's scepticism on the likelihood of redeemed sexuality, with the world's lovers ground en masse into 'dust' and 'corruption', and even Plato condemned to captivity through nothing more than the sexual impulse (254-9), 'The Triumph of Life' still leaves the escape-routes of Uranian love, and love for creation itself, open to the idealistic and the world-weary. Rousseau is by no means excluded:

[...] in the *Confessions* Rousseau gives the impression that he was lost in [...] society, held by it but not at home in it, wandering in Dante's dark wood as he reached the middle of his life. Then, in the 1750s, he tried to break out of this alien world, and to formulate in writing his criticism of it and the possible escape-routes, whether into solitude or into a regenerated society.<sup>425</sup>

The significance of Dante in 'The Triumph of Life' and its sceptical depictions of sexuality is made explicit, with reference to the Florentine poet 'who from the lowest depths of Hell/ Through every Paradise and through all glory/ Love led serene, and who returned to tell/ In words of hate and awe the wondrous story/ How all things are transfigured, except Love' (472-6). For all his faults (and disregarding as best we may the more shocking activities of the actual Rousseau) there is still a redeeming factor in Rousseau's inadvertent fall from an essentially idealistic platform, based upon the genuine desire for love without fully comprehending its nature (particularly its dual nature). He is clearly set apart from the various 'anarchs' and false counsellors whose 'power was given/ But to destroy' (292-3), whom Dante would assuredly have consigned to the Nether Hell of malicious sins and who seem no more hopeful of release in Shelley's spirit-world.

<sup>425</sup> From Peter France's introduction to the *Reveries* (pp. 17-8).

As Shelley's Rousseau declares, 'I was overcome/ By my own heart alone, which neither age/ Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb/ Could temper to its object.' (240-3) A somewhat obscure phrase, which I interpret (referring the final pronoun to Rousseau's heart, as opposed to its ordeals<sup>426</sup>) as a despairing complaint that these trials – which reduced him to the self-contemplating condition of the *Reveries* (and in which he professed to place all his spiritual hopes) – have, in light of his death, fallen short of his cherished 'object'. Rather than finding in death the joy or the peace that eluded him in life, he instead finds a ghastly parody of that detested life. External factors could not 'temper' his sensual heart to the proper state for enlightenment, whilst he was unprepared to have his illusions (his 'lamps of night') extinguished. In Dante's scheme, this version of Rousseau therefore sins through failure to make a correct choice as opposed to a deliberate, malicious choice, which potentially fits him for inclusion in one of the upper circles of the Inferno,<sup>427</sup> the circle of the tempest-tossed lustful being the most apposite under the circumstances. This punishment is, however, already duplicated by Shelley in the 'fierce and obscene' dancing hordes, 'Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun' (144), and Rousseau has got clear of this doomed mob, albeit as a pale shadow of his former self. If his state is, as it thus seems, purgatorial, it is worth noting that the sins purged on Dante's mountain are all venial perversions of love:<sup>428</sup> 'Love Perverted' chiefly signifying the symptomatic states of self-love (encompassing pride, envy, and wrath); 'Love Defective' signifying sloth, such as leads to morbid fantasies (bearing in mind that the dream of the siren occurs on this cornice); and 'Excessive Love of Secondary Goods' signifying avarice, gluttony, and lust. The implication of all of this, and the specific mention of Dante's discovery that love, at all events, is eternal and unchanging, is that any sincerely-felt love, immersed in whatever degree of mundane illusion, retains its redeeming quality. The mutual, sensual indulgence of the damned lustful and Shelley's decaying dancers is another matter, but the simple fact that sensuality

<sup>426</sup> Duffy takes the opposite line on this in *Rousseau in England*, p. 117: '[...] what Rousseau does with this emphasis is list not indignities from which he has failed to take a chastening cue but rather adversities against which he has held firm.'

<sup>427</sup> 'The Circles of Incontinence' (for the lustful, the gluttonous, the hoarders and spendthrifts, and the wrathful) are encountered in *Hell*, V-VII.

<sup>428</sup> *Purgatory*, diagram on pp. 202-3.

did not satisfy Rousseau, as testified by the love-lust distinctions in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and his own lack-lustre relations with Thérèse le Vasseur, the evident yearning for a sincere and empathic love that led him into fantasy, and the love for God and nature expressed in the *Reveries*, are all signs of hope for the future, for Shelley as well as for Rousseau. Whilst I do not wish to over-stress the notion of biographical self-identification,<sup>429</sup> it is hard to overlook the image of the erased ‘track of deer’ compared to the ‘herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter’s dart’ (*Adonais*, 297) in the midst of Shelley’s self-imposed Italian exile. This is all the more unavoidable when backed up by the claim that ‘The wounded deer must seek the herb no more/ In which its heart’s cure lies’ (‘The Serpent Is Shut Out from Paradise’, 2-3). Aside from his sense of press persecution, chiefly concentrated in the counter-attacks of *Adonais*,<sup>430</sup> his personal fears of Rousseau-esque forlorn estrangement from former friends and loved ones (particularly Mary Shelley, and Jane and Edward Williams), and that ‘love’ for him has become a passionate but delusive, unattainable, self-destructive fantasy, are repeatedly conveyed in his later confessional works.

When passion’s trance is overpast,  
 If tenderness and truth could last  
 Or live – whilst all wild feelings keep  
 Some mortal slumber, dark and deep –  
 I should not weep, I should not weep!<sup>431</sup>

<sup>429</sup> Nevertheless, see *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 213:

[...] there certainly are some striking parallels. Rousseau and Shelley had in common certain traits – eccentricity of dress and a love of childish sports which continued into adulthood. [...] Like Rousseau, Shelley lived in a retreat from the world which he called the Hermitage, and both had a reputation for being mad. [...] In their defects there were also parallels between the two. [...] Shelley was guilty of a similar neglect, for despite fighting tooth and nail for custody of his children by Harriet, and supporting them financially, he made no attempt to see them after his elopement with Mary.

<sup>430</sup> Cf. *Adonais*, 316-42, and n. 2 in *PP*, p. 401: ‘Throughout this and the following stanza Shelley attacks the anonymous author of the *Quarterly Review*’s attack on Keats. Shelley believed him to be Robert Southey, who (Shelley thought) was also the hostile reviewer of works by Hunt and himself.’

<sup>431</sup> ‘When Passion’s Trance is Overpast’, 1821, 1-5. Cited from *PP*, p. 442.

This bears distinct resemblance to Rousseau's state in the *Reveries*, as he contemplates his mistake in elevating 'brief moments of madness and passion' over 'a single and lasting state of happiness'. The anxiety becomes even more pronounced in 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici' (1822) as he compares his condition of unfulfilled, passionate desire to 'the fish who came/ To worship the delusive flame' (53-4), where the 'flame' in question is the lamp of a fisherman intending to spear them.<sup>432</sup> The false fire of self-destruction proves to be the true nature of yet another apparently 'ethereal flame'. We note that the young, passionate dancers of 'The Triumph of Life' are 'Like moths by light attracted and repelled,/ Oft to new bright destruction come and go' (153-4). On the subject of moths, however, whilst Shelley was not apparently averse to the identity per se, it seems from 'One Word Is Too Often Profaned'<sup>433</sup> that he still consciously disdained to fly at the same mundane fire as the general insect-mob:

I can not give what men call love,  
 But wilt thou accept not  
 The worship the heart lifts above  
 And the Heavens reject not, –  
 The desire of the moth for the star,  
 Of the night for the morrow,  
 The devotion to something afar  
 From the sphere of our sorrow.      (9-16)

'[...] [W]hat men call love', or at least the vast majority in 'The Triumph of Life', is the mundane sensuality which is not even a true reflection of the ideal love: merely a mocking puppet-

<sup>432</sup> The same image occurs in the *Paradiso*, V, 100-4, describing the souls ('splendours') which gravitate towards Dante and Beatrice in the Heaven of Mercury. Shelley's cruelly ironic (if somewhat more appropriate) version of this beatific image dramatically demonstrates the conflict in his poems of this period between idealism and despair, and the sense of self-destruction accompanying both. Cited from *Dante's Paradiso*, trans. Laurence Binyon (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1943).

<sup>433</sup> No date, but associated with the Jane Williams lyrics. *PP*, p. 446, n. 9.

shadow cast by the ‘cold glare’ of Life’s all-too-superficial glamour. Shelley’s obvious anxieties in these later works concerning the true nature of his sentiments are counterbalanced by his turning to Dante, as he does here with the assertion of his ‘devotion to something afar/ From the sphere of our sorrow’, pledging his status as a Dantean pilgrim.<sup>434</sup> The introduction of Dante’s name into ‘The Triumph of Life’, not to mention his implicit exclusion from the condemned pageant and the purgatorial surroundings, suggest that ‘The Triumph of Life’ was reaching to a similar point. Loveless sexuality lies in the same state as it has occupied since *Zastrozzi*: consigned to a pit of Gothic horrors and humiliations, and finally to the ‘dust’ and ‘corruption’ of the grave. But even a flawed and tainted love – as long as it may still be called love without ‘profaning’ the very name – may tend towards a better state, and this stands as both Rousseau’s posthumous consolation and in Shelley’s mind, his own last, best hope.

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<sup>434</sup> Duffy takes this somewhat further. Cf. *Rousseau in England*, p. 156:

When Shelley makes explicit reference to Dante, he does more than simply use the “Triumph” as a forum within which to compliment his *maestro ad autore*. In addition, he fixes an identity in argument and invites a comparison in craft. He boldly but tactfully suggests that in him Dante has found a worthy successor [...].



**‘A most enervating and filthy cheat’:<sup>435</sup>**

**The rise and fall of Gothic sexuality in *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais*.**

In this last chapter I turn from Shelley’s sceptical, Gothic-influenced portraits of humanity and sexuality to two works which seem, at least on the face of things, much less morbid in their pursuit of uncompromising idealism. Whereas sexual representations in *The Cenci*, ‘Invocation to Misery’, ‘Alastor’, *Laon and Cythna*, and ‘The Triumph of Life’ are rife with sadism and sado-masochism, death, decay, disillusionment, and cruel irony – elements which are never satisfactorily dispelled<sup>436</sup> – *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais* strive towards a less anarchic or sceptical culmination, making fewer concessions to the Gothic along the way. The remaining concessions, however, are all the more jarring for their relative scarcity. Whereas a ‘leprous corpse’ would be a commonplace object in *The Cenci* or the latter part of *Laon and Cythna*, it cannot help but seem rather disharmonious in the unspoiled landscape of *Adonais*, even when figuring rather ironically in an image of natural regeneration: for even if the ‘spirit’ of nature may cheat death on the grander scale, no proof can be adduced that even the most surpassing of human spirits (specifically, the dead Adonais/ Keats) may hope to share in that permanence. In an otherwise beautiful and deathless context, humanity – even in its most admirable form – is presented as the sole ‘quintessence of dust’; a repugnant and sterile signifier of decomposition.<sup>437</sup>

<sup>435</sup> Byron. *Cain*, II, i, l. 57.

<sup>436</sup> This is excepting the largely allegorical vision of *Prometheus Unbound*, since this study is principally focused upon depictions of human sexuality. Bonca deals at length with the nature of idealised sexuality in *Prometheus Unbound. Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, pp. 177-94.

<sup>437</sup> Whilst Shelley is operating in a convention with this passage, which bears significant resemblance to the anonymous ‘Lament for Bion’ (c. 100 B.C), it is Shelley himself who introduces the theme of decomposition. Cf. *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse*, ed. Constantine A. Trypanis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 346:

Alas! When the mallow dies in the garden, or the green parsley, or the thriving, curly dill, [yet] they come to life again and spring forth into another year. But we men, the great and powerful, the wise, when once we die, hear nothing in the hollow earth, and sleep a very long, endless sleep, from which there is no waking.

The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender  
 Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;  
 Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour  
 Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death  
 And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;  
 Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows  
 Be as a sword consumed before the sheath  
 By sightless lightning? – th'intense atom glows  
 A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose. (*Adonais*, 172-80)

Nature, apparently unsympathetic to the plight of the human soul or ego (the two may be separable – indeed, they may have to be, if Shelley is to admit of any hope), thrives regardless, and even the grave-worms are tactlessly ‘merry’ in spite of human melancholy. Nevertheless, it is the poet-narrator of *Adonais* who ultimately succeeds in conceiving, in spite of this apparent separateness of mortal humanity from regenerative nature, a vision of human immortality. The poet-narrator of *Epipsychidion*, by contrast, begins with what seems a confident, consciously Dantean progress towards ultimate beauty in the idealised figure of his beloved Emilia, and seemingly attains it, only to experience the most sudden, anticlimactic regression:

The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
 Into the height of love's rare Universe,  
 Are chains of lead around its flight of fire. –  
 I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (*Epipsychidion*, 588-91)

Why an elegy should end on an unexpectedly triumphant note, while a triumph of love should suddenly collapse into a slough of despond leads us into an examination of the key theme underlying every work of Shelley's so far encountered, including the early Gothic exercises: the total incompatibility of egotism with Uranian love – the former invariably neutralising or distorting the nature of the latter – and beyond that, immortality.

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The anticlimax of *Epipsychidion* has been variously interpreted. Carlos Baker's analysis, whilst offering a determined and valuable argument against purely biographical interpretations,<sup>438</sup> and – up to a point – a convincing argument for viewing this work as an exercise in 'sexual imagery to symbolize the absolute and permanent union, on a spiritual plane, of the human spirit (the creative soul) and the divine power it requires' (*Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 225), suffers by cutting short at the anticlimax, which is left unconsidered. Baker analyses the last section of the poem (not including the Dante-imitating epilogue) to the point where the united lovers become 'One hope within two wills, one will beneath/ Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,/ One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,/ And one annihilation.' (584-7) These emerging paradoxes (Heaven and Hell? Immortality and annihilation?) are not, in Baker's study, assumed to undermine the central theme of this section: 'the [spiritual] merger and the soul's transfiguration under a metaphor of marriage' (*Major Poetry*, p. 237), although the fact that they are instantly succeeded by 'Woe is me!' (587) and the aforementioned anticlimax would seem to stand as a confirmation of this

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<sup>438</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, pp. 215-38 (pp. 231-2):

[A biographical interpretation of *Epipsychidion*] is obviously possible, and to an extent Shelley invited future critics to take such a view [...] Yet this interpretation is too obvious, too literalistic, and – if one thinks it over carefully in the Dantean context in which the poem was written – too ridiculous to be entirely credible. [...] It is, precisely as Shelley said it was, the "idealized history" of his "life and feelings" – but the deep inner "life and feelings" of the spirit rather than the outer events of the man's career. "Idealized" for Shelley meant "taken out of the time-space dimension and rendered as an abstraction." "Feelings" for Shelley meant "excitations of the intellectual imagination."

An interpretation of *Epipsychidion* which takes the straightforwardly biographical approach is Kenneth Neill Cameron's 'The Planet-Tempest Passage in *Epipsychidion*' in *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 63 (1948), pp. 950-72 (Cited from *PP*, pp. 637-58). Crook and Guiton also defend the practice of biographical analysis.

undermining process.

Even when it is taken into consideration, Shelley's despairing closing statements attract diverse opinions. Analysing *Epipsychidion* as a failed attempt 'within a merely Platonic frame of reference' to depict an 'imageless' 'deep truth',<sup>439</sup> Milton Wilson interprets the final declaration as 'a sudden surge of despair about the possibility of making poetry soar to the empyrean' (*Shelley's Later Poetry*, p. 223). Bonca's psychosexual study reads it as an expression of Shelley's 'fundamental distrust of sexual love' (*Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 194):

In *Epipsychidion*'s climactic passage, as the lover's breath intermixes, their bosoms fuse, and their "veins beat together," Shelleyan mingled being reaches – or falls into – the abyss that yawns in even his earliest Gothics [...]. Hoping that he has at last discovered "passion's golden purity" and the pristine flame that would truly allow him to "pierce / Into the height of love's rare Universe," the speaker instead sinks with the weight of his own ego into death's alluring embrace [...]. (ibid.)

Whilst the nature of this study is inclined more towards Bonca's interpretation than Wilson's, the two are inextricably linked: *Epipsychidion* represents Shelley's last great, unsuccessful attempt to communicate the concept of a form of consummated sexuality entirely free from sensuality, shame, and every last 'taint of earthly grossness'. Alternatively, although it is not generally assumed, we might interpret it as Shelley's highly successful (though by no means final) exercise in the pessimistic depiction of the innate sensual degeneracy that betrays his male protagonists from Verezzi to Rousseau of 'The Triumph of Life', and was a matter of great personal anxiety to the author himself.

Bernard Beatty, very much alert to this Pandemian undercurrent,<sup>440</sup> focuses upon the varying

<sup>439</sup> *Shelley's Later Poetry*, p. 221.

<sup>440</sup> 'The Transformation of Discourse: *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais*, and some lyrics', in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 213-38. Beatty makes a point of contrasting the ultimately spurious idealism of *Epipsychidion* 'with

register of *Epipsychidion*, in which Shelley's narrator intersperses transient moments of intense excitement until the more sustained excitement of the final movement (ll. 383-591), in which the poet envisions the 'elopement' to an Elysian island with Emilia. Beatty's interpretation of this pattern casts considerable doubt on the 'spiritual' nature of the love-relationship depicted:

We have experienced a sudden access of force in the three lyrical passages which, by making great physical demands on the reader's lungs, ensure that he is in a state analogous to excitement. We anticipate some even greater demand that is going to be made upon us, some flight of verse so daringly extended that it will replace the base register altogether [...]. It is in this sense that the poem exhibits the potentiality which it celebrates. The device is one which is familiar in horror stories and pornography. We read *Epipsychidion*, one might say, with a sense of 'mounting expectation'. This finds release in the two hundred line section [...] which is the poem's dazzling culmination. This section, as we would expect, is terminated by the most elaborate of the series of acknowledgements in which the poet bemoans his inability to sustain flight indefinitely. (*Essays on Shelley*, p. 220)

The implication of this – that *Epipsychidion*, for all its spiritual gestures, is essentially the highly sensual build-up to a 'poetic orgasm' – is also detected by Bonca, who describes the lover's union as 'the autoerotic experience of making love to a sister-spouse' (*Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 121): a notably thorny issue for Shelley. As previously noted, incest within Shelley's works is by no means a given negative. *Laon and Cythna* establishes, or fantasises, the concept of the ideal sexual and spiritual union, and significantly makes Cythna the active party. Until Laon accepts a passive stance, the sexual passion on his part is conspicuously debased to essential auto-erotism.

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Dante's *The New Life* [whose protagonist] seeks only Beatrice's freely bestowed greeting', whereas *Epipsychidion* 'appears to sanction some kind of transcendental rape of Emily [...]' (p. 219).

The relevance of such power dynamics to *Epipsychidion* is clear enough, when one considers the degree to which the poet-narrator monopolises all expression and action: he holds the narrative of the main section from beginning to anticlimax, and solely impels the significant event between himself and Emilia. Contrasting *Laon and Cythna*, which is mostly narrated by the male protagonist, there is nevertheless a substantial amount of narration from Cythna, who also enacts the significant ‘elopement’ of Canto VI (2497-685) in fine style, riding a ‘black Tartarian horse of giant frame’, ‘like to an angel, robed in white’ and ‘waving a sword’.<sup>441</sup> It is sufficiently demonstrated in these works that incest *per se* is not the precursor to a fall from grace. Bearing in mind the Dantean context of *Epipsychidion*, the poet’s mode of address to his beloved (‘Spouse! Sister! Angel! Pilot of the Fate/ Whose course has been so starless!’ 130-1) may be interpreted as a matter of purely spiritual significance<sup>442</sup> as opposed to any morbid fetish (which, ironically, is exactly what we finish with). The fall from grace consistently occurs when Shelley’s patriarchal characters (which include Matilda and Beatrice) assume control of the situation.

The apparent desire for Uranian love could all too easily be employed, as I noted at length in chapter IV, as a rhetorical screen for purely Pandemian urges. The lover of *Epipsychidion* may express the desire for a spiritual apotheosis and appear to be bent entirely upon that object, but Shelley’s scepticism offers little enough leeway. A man who can, at the last, prioritise spirituality above sexuality is, in his view, an all too rare occurrence: indeed, he states only two instances – Socrates and Christ – although we might tentatively add Dante for a third. For as Beatty notes, Dante’s earthly intentions towards his beloved go no further than maintaining an amicable yet distant relationship,<sup>443</sup> perhaps incorporating the rationale that an infinitely deferred pleasure is a pleasure never terminated. *Epipsychidion* puts the antithesis of this to the test, and proves it. The

<sup>441</sup> This splendid but militant depiction of Cythna may be intended to evoke Spenser’s Britomart – heroine of *The Faerie Queene* (Book III) – whom Spenser himself appears to establish as an alternative female ‘role model’ and is certainly a more appealing portrait than the numerous female victims and allegorical temptresses that crowd Spenser’s pages.

<sup>442</sup> *Paradiso*, VII, 58: Beatrice addresses Dante as ‘Brother’ (‘frate’).

<sup>443</sup> Cf. Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), XVII, p. 54: ‘[...] the aim of my love was once the greeting of one whom perhaps you are aware, and in that resided all my blessedness and joy, for it was the aim and end of all my desires; [...]’.

‘little death’ of coition most certainly occurs: ‘[...] the wells/ Which boil under our being’s inmost cells,/ The fountains of our deepest life, shall be/ Confused in passion’s golden purity,/ As mountain-springs under the morning Sun.’ (568-72) Shortly afterwards, ‘death’ turns out to be the operative word. In the words of another inspirational source for *Epipsychidion*:

‘[...] love is strong as death,/ passion cruel as the grave;/ it blazes up like a blazing fire,/ fiercer than any flame.’ (Song of Songs 8. 6. *Oxford Study Bible*, p. 699)

As we may recall from Byron’s assessment of Rousseau, the apparently ‘ethereal flame’ of sexual passion may, in fact, possess more of the properties of ‘flame’ than of ‘ether’.

Shelley signals this biblical source in *Epipsychidion* 389-407, revising it into a description of Uranian love which, being focused upon the spiritual and eternal, is stronger even than death. The poet-narrator thus enjoins his beloved not to waste any passion upon his perishable carcass, but somewhat ambiguously suggests that she save all bridal desires for the union of their spirits. As a sublimation of sexuality this seems all too simplistic. Whatever the nature of the relationship posited, the attitude of the protagonist and the nature of his desire remain apparently unchanged:

To whatsoe’er of dull mortality  
 Is mine, remain a vestal sister still;  
 To the intense, the deep, the imperishable,  
 Not mine but me, henceforth be thou united  
 Even as a bride, delighting and delighted.  
 [...]  
 The walls are high, the gates are strong, thick set  
 The sentinels – but true love never yet

Was thus constrained: it overleaps all fence:  
 Like lightning, with invisible violence  
 Piercing its continents; like Heaven's free breath,  
 Which he who grasps can hold not; liker Death,  
 Who rides upon a thought and makes his way  
 Through temple, tower, and palace, and the array  
 Of arms: more strength has Love than he or they;  
 For it can burst his charnel, and make free  
 The limbs in chains, the heart in agony,  
 The soul in dust and chaos. (389-407)

The assertion that 'true love' can conquer death is reiterated even amidst the carnal and charnel 'chaos' of 'The Triumph of Life' (471-6), so there is no reason to doubt that statement here on its own merits.<sup>444</sup> In *Epipsychidion's* loosely Dantean scheme, this is the ironic crux of the poem: ironic because of the nature of the love pursued. The poet merely transfers the desire for the physical ecstasy of a 'bridal' consummation to a 'spiritual' rather than a physical body. At this crucial moment of elopement, he envisions Emilia's soul in the same terms he would her body. It may be some mark of the poet's overriding obsession that he envisions the Elysian island in all-too-

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<sup>444</sup> However, the statement that love 'overleaps all fence' (398) bears a dangerously close resemblance to *Paradise Lost*, IV, 172-92:

Now to th' ascent of that steep savage hill  
 Satan had journeyed on, pensive and slow;  
 But further way found none, [...]  
 [...]  
 One gate there only was, and that looked east  
 On th' other side: which when th' Arch-felon saw  
 Due entrance he disdained, and in contempt,  
 At one slight bound high overleaped all bound  
 Of hill or highest wall, [...]  
 [...]  
 So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold:

The fact that the poet's 'love' comes to resemble both Milton's insidious Satan and Death in close proximity can hardly be interpreted as auspicious.



similar terms:

[...] from the sea there rise, and from the sky  
 There fall, clear exhalations, soft and bright,  
 Veil after veil, each hiding some delight,  
 Which Sun or Moon or zephyr draw aside,  
 Till the isle's beauty, like a naked bride  
 Glowing at once with love and loveliness,  
 Blushes and trembles at its own excess: (470-6)

It is somewhat ironic that Shelley, whose attitude to actual rape seems healthily contemptuous judging from *The Cenci* and *Laon and Cythna*, was nevertheless partial to the surreal image of nature being sexually interfered with by some probing poet. It also occurs in *A Defence of Poetry*,<sup>445</sup> and again in *Peter Bell the Third*, 313-22:

But from the first 'twas Peter's drift  
 To be a kind of moral eunuch  
 He touched the hem of Nature's shift,  
 Felt faint – and never dared uplift  
 The closest, all-concealing tunic.

She laughed the while, with an arch smile,  
 And kissed him with a sister's kiss,  
 And said – “My best Diogenes,

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<sup>445</sup> *PP*, p. 505: ‘Poetry [...] strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms.’

I love you well – but, if you please,  
Tempt not again my deepest bliss.

Peter Bell's ludicrous and tentative overtures, and the brush-off he receives from his would-be lover, bear comparison with Rousseau's infamous encounter with the Venetian prostitute (*Confessions*, pp. 308-10). There are two related ways of looking at this: in *Peter Bell* and Rousseau's own interpretation of his encounter, a false social ethic of sexual shame – the distorting lens through which Rousseau can only perceive Zuletta as a degraded and loveless creature – is presented as the greatest threat to empathic love. In *Epipsychidion*, male sexuality itself is presented as the distorting lens, through which a would-be Dante perceives his Beatrice with the eyes of a voyeur rather than a pilgrim, and she is valued for her pornographic appeal rather than for any of the more correctly spiritual or transcendental virtues upon which he had previously been waxing lyrical:

See where she stands! a mortal shape indued  
With love and life and light and deity,  
And motion which may change but cannot die;  
An image of some bright Eternity;  
A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour  
Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender  
Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love  
Under whose motions life's dull billows move;  
A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;  
A Vision like incarnate April, warning,  
With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy

Into his summer grave. (112-23)

Such universal, pseudo-Platonic, life-giving, redemptive properties fit Emilia for two roles: that of the Uranian Aphrodite, and, as previously suggested in view of the Dantean context and imagery ('Splendour [...] third sphere'),<sup>446</sup> that of Beatrice to the poet-narrator's Dante. His attempt to monopolise access to such a figure upon his island retreat is thus a dubious enough exercise whatever the motives, and compares unfavourably with the actual Dante's celebration of his beloved's supposed universal beneficence which he does not attempt to claim, after the fashion of the morbid Pandemian lover,<sup>447</sup> all to himself:

They see all goodness perfect made who see  
 My lady among ladies take her place.  
 Her presence brings them such felicity  
 They render thanks to God for this sweet grace.  
 Her beauty has such wondrous quality  
 It leaves in women's hearts no envious trace;  
 Clothed in nobility they're seen to be  
 Who walk with her, and faith and love embrace.<sup>448</sup>

His aspirations aside, it would be hard to refrain from describing the poet-lover of *Epipsychidion* as a Pandemian lover, since his morbidity and selfishness – the key characteristics – are striking. The Dante of *La Vita Nuova*, reconciled to the impossibility of receiving special

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<sup>446</sup> *Paradiso*, IX, 13-14 (pp. 98-9): 'Ed ecco un altro di quelli splendori/ ver me si fece' ('And lo, another of those splendours came/ Toward me'). The 'third sphere'/ third heaven (that of Venus/ love) is attained by Dante in *Paradiso*, VIII.

<sup>447</sup> Who, according to the *Phaedrus*, 'will of course be jealous' (p. 38) in attempting 'to derive the greatest pleasure possible from the object of his passion.'

<sup>448</sup> *Vita Nuova*, XXVI (p. 77).

consideration from Beatrice, settles instead to bask in the glow of the democratic, celestial influence she spreads throughout Florentine society (and laments, following her death, that the entire city will be affected by so profound a loss).<sup>449</sup> Shelley's protagonist, although aware that the society he is deserting is grievously in need of such a redeeming influence, nevertheless entertains fantasies of stealing away with its source to some idyll of the ego, leaving the world to its various woes: 'It is a favoured place. Famine or Blight,/ Pestilence, War and Earthquake, never light/ Upon its mountain-peaks; blind vultures, they/ Sail onward far upon their fatal way' (*Epipsychidion*, 461-4). We have already observed this pattern of isolation in two works, both of which hold keys to the failure of the poet-narrator's project: 'Alastor' and 'Invocation to Misery', the former of which could, in retrospect, be interpreted as the *Epipsychidion* experience as witnessed and related by a pitying third party. As the Preface to 'Alastor' states, 'The picture is not barren of instruction to actual men. The Poet's self-centred seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin' (*PP*, p. 69). This might equally be applied to the later work.

The unconsummated passion of 'Alastor', focused upon a parasitic delusion, is as destructive as the consummated passion in *Epipsychidion* and in 'Invocation to Misery'. The latter is an undisguised, masochistic embrace of self-destruction, whereas the poet-narrator of *Epipsychidion* sets up his beloved as a spiritual saviour – initially universal, and then purely personal. Nevertheless, his apparent effort to monopolise redemption and immortality whilst abandoning the world to anarchy and decay is hardly a more sympathetic stance than that of the openly cynical lover of 'Invocation to Misery', who likewise withdraws with his 'beloved' (i.e. into egotism and self-contempt) from human contact, and regards his fellow-beings with all-encompassing disdain (56-64): 'What but mockery can they mean [...]?' (64) The conscious rejection of humanity even in an effort at self-purification (as in *Epipsychidion*) rather than deliberate misanthropy (as in 'Invocation to Misery') had already come under severe judgement

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<sup>449</sup> *Vita Nuova*, XL (p. 97): 'The city's lost her source of blessedness,/ And even words which may of her be told/ Have power to move tears in everyone.'

from Shelley throughout ‘Alastor’, and this would be reinforced by his criticism of Rousseau – figuratively rejected in favour of Dante – in ‘The Triumph of Life’.

As previously stated, in spite of being admired by Shelley and Wollstonecraft for his poetic and rhetorical skills, and his sincere efforts as a reformer, Rousseau was ultimately discarded by both as an ideological influence, on account of the egotistic and reactionary opinions (especially on gender essentialism and its social impact) which he persisted in harbouring and defending. Shelley identifies Rousseau’s crowning literary achievement as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, throughout which there runs an atypical strand of barely-qualified self-deprecation in the pseudo-biographical character of Saint-Preux, whose declamations on the subject of love constitute a grotesque and pitiable parody of the conventional courtly lover.<sup>450</sup> In revealing the essential core of soul-consuming lust that consistently lies within Saint-Preux’s rhetoric of spirituality and virtue, Rousseau calls into question the moral status of the entire genre of the love story or the love poem, casting them in the inglorious light of seduction tools.<sup>451</sup> Geoffrey Ward attributes a similar purpose to Shelley’s work:

[In *Epipsychidion*] It is not even monogamy alone that is attacked, but any form of

<sup>450</sup> This theme appears to be emphasised in Rousseau’s choice of title, equating his own fairly sordid hero and less-than-intrepid heroine with the illicit love affair of Pierre Abelard (1079-1142) and Heloise (1101-64): a long-standing archetype for tragic and/ or law-defying love. Cf. Lass, Abraham H.; Kiremidjian, David; Goldstein, Ruth M, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Classical & Literary Allusion* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1987), pp. 1-2.

<sup>451</sup> Chaucer’s satirical but sympathetic rendering of *Troilus and Criseyde* fulfils precisely the same function, although it has a specific target: Boccaccio, who had celebrated a patently antisocial and purely sexual form of love in *Il Filostrato*. Remarkably, considering that Boccaccio’s sexual ethics throughout this work, *Teseida* and *The Decameron* are extremely questionable (antisocial, egotistic, and downright sadistic characters being frequently approved by the authorial voices in their sordid careers), Shelley appears to have had a considerable admiration for the author in question. He is favourably mentioned in *A Defence of Poetry* (PP, p. 502) among the poets who have apparently offered a positive contribution to the ‘moral condition’ of the world, and again in *Peter Bell the Third*, where some explanation is provided in a citation: ‘*Bocca baciata non perde ventura/ Anzi rinnuova come fa la luna*’ (328-9). [‘A kissed mouth loses no savour, but is renewed like the moon.’] *The Decameron*, trans. Richard Aldington (London: Guild Publishing, 1982), p. 122. This is at least consistent with the free love ethic which Shelley first lays out in the notes to *Queen Mab* and reiterates in *Epipsychidion* 147-73: ‘True Love in this differs from gold and clay/ That to divide is not to take away’ (160-1). Whilst there are no grounds for doubting this statement on its own merits, we should be aware that all statements are necessarily dubious in the rhetorical net the *Epipsychidion* lover casts for his beloved. Whether this indicates a qualification of Shelley’s admiration for Boccaccio (i.e. a recognition that a lover, or a writer with purely sexual interests could pervert even the best doctrines) is possible, given the similarity of Shelley’s gold/ clay analogy to Boccaccio’s ‘kissed mouth’, but indeterminate. Shelley’s attitude to Boccaccio, on the whole, seems contradictory.

exclusive choice that restricts human potential [...]. In a deliberate undercutting of the conventional poem of ideal love, Shelley makes it clear that Emilia is not to be a life-partner, or an object of obsessive or exclusive attention. Rather she is to be a sign, a stimulus or catalyst, an instigator of release of imprisoned meaning, expression of the endless change perfusing the material world and offered in truthful opposition to the restrictions of any dogma.<sup>452</sup>

The 'conventional poem of ideal love' takes it for granted, of course, that 'true' love is a faithful, exclusive relationship between lover and beloved, and would be automatically dissipated by admitting any other participants into the relationship. This is opposed to the definition of true love stated in *Epipsychidion*, in which no such possessive restrictions are permitted. On the contrary, love is depicted as a revolutionary force with the potential to pervade the entire universe 'with glorious beams, and [kill]/ Error, the worm' (167-8). This is hardly feasible if 'love' is to be interpreted as an event that never consciously occurs between more than two people in emotional isolation. On the contrary, such a persistent refusal to make any headway in the ascent to absolute beauty beyond the stage of adoring a single partner,<sup>453</sup> is represented as spiritual suicide: 'Narrow/ The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,/ The life that wears, the spirit that creates/ One object, and one form, and builds thereby/ A sepulchre for its eternity.' (169-73) It is most ironic, if not incredible, that the poet-narrator who clearly makes this claim promptly crawls into his own sepulchre without apparently noticing the paradox, unless we take his entire declaration as a cynically elaborate seduction (which is unlikely, considering his heartfelt post-coital expressions of ultimate failure).

The nature of lust in *Epipsychidion* is, however, so extremely insidious as to make the

<sup>452</sup> Geoffrey Ward, 'Transforming Presence: Poetic Idealism in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion*', in *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott, pp. 191-212 (p. 208).

<sup>453</sup> *Symposium*, pp. 92-5. Whilst an attachment to 'one particular beautiful person' (p. 92) is considered a necessary milestone in the progress of Plato's philosophic lover, it is certainly not considered as the be-all and end-all: this relationship should progress from the contemplation of physical beauty to spiritual beauty, beauty in others (not the beloved alone), beauty in its widest sense (including in morals and sciences), and eventual enlightenment, with the revelation of the eternal form of beauty.

naiveté of Shelley's character less remarkable.<sup>454</sup> As in 'Alastor' and 'The Triumph of Life', the Pandemian Aphrodite may be unconsciously summoned into being simply by a distorted, egocentric perception of what is beautiful and natural, and only be revealed in her true, repulsive aspect, after the damage has been done. This allegorical pattern occurs in condensed form in *Epipsychidion* 256-66, when the poet, in proper Spenserian vein, lights upon a false counterpart to his beloved, who seduces him and leaves him half-dead:

The breath of her false mouth was like faint flowers,  
 Her touch was as electric poison, – flame  
 Out of her looks into my vitals came,  
 And from her living cheeks and bosom flew  
 A killing air, which pierced like honey-dew  
 Into the core of my green heart, and lay  
 Upon its leaves; until, as hair grown grey  
 O'er a young brow, they hid its unblown prime  
 With ruins of unseasonable time.

Crook and Guiton, based upon claims by Thornton Hunt, have interpreted this passage as an allegorised account of an otherwise undocumented encounter of Shelley's with a prostitute (possibly at Oxford),<sup>455</sup> the untimely grey hair signifying the contraction of syphilis. Symbolically, the image relates to the condition of the poet's 'green heart' (combining associations of youth, nature, and

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<sup>454</sup> It may be pertinent to note, bearing in mind the undertones of Gothic lust which infect and eventually collapse *Epipsychidion*, that the figure of the ineffectual, naïve, yet reckless protagonist is a staple of the Gothic literary genre from Ann Radcliffe's Vincentio di Vivaldi (*The Italian*) to H P Lovecraft's Charles Dexter Ward (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, 1927), and further beyond into any number of horror films. It is hardly surprising that Beatty links *Epipsychidion*'s technique with this genre: Shelley represents Pandemian love/ lust very much in the aspect of a 'lurking horror,' briefly revealed in the forms (or warnings) of the 'sepulchre' and the vampiric false 'One' of 256-66, which his protagonist nevertheless stumbles into at the end and is 'destroyed'. The lover of *Epipsychidion*, in structural terms, is thus not all that far removed from Verezzi.

<sup>455</sup> *Shelley's Venomed Melody* pp. 5-6, 145-55.

naivety), which has been ‘aged’ through the encounter. Bearing in mind the bad press Shelley tended to grant old age, ‘aged’ presumably indicates ‘hardened’ and ‘corrupted’. The ‘fire’ of love is once again depicted as a parasitic force, and the image of the honey-dew<sup>456</sup> becomes closely equivalent to that of the grave-worm: the posthumous agent of the decay that begins with the withdrawal into sensualism.<sup>457</sup>

The image of the honey-dew<sup>458</sup> occurs previously in *Epipsychidion*, in the poet’s second

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., p. 148: ‘The compound denotes the gummy excrement left on leaves by aphids, which have sucked out the plant’s own sap [...] and which is followed by a black mouldy powder, withering the plant.’

<sup>457</sup> This remarkably botanical encounter with sexualised death has a possible later counterpart in George MacDonald’s 1857 novel *Phantastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1981), in which the questing protagonist (in spite of cautions received from a faded, Keatsian knight-at-arms) mistakes a malevolent dryad for his beloved, spends the night with her (sexual activity is not explicit, but inevitably implied), then wakes to the realisation that she resembles a cankered mass of wood – like an ‘open coffin’ (p. 46) – when seen from the back. She then makes a narrowly unsuccessful bid to hand him over to an even more hostile ‘walking Death’ (p. 47) – the Ash creature, which has previously been described as resembling a vampire or corpse (p. 28). The protagonist is both afraid and ‘fascinated’ (p. 47) by this necrotic being. As with Dante’s damned souls, this ‘death of unfathomable horror’ (ibid.) is a conscious, semi-willing choice.

Although this incident shows far more obvious relations with Keat’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ and Coleridge’s *Christabel*, its resemblance to the ‘false beloved’ encounters in Shelley’s works is perhaps sufficiently signalled by the epigraph from ‘Alastor’ (479-88) which opens chapter I of *Phantastes* (p. 5). *Epipsychidion*’s false one is also a clear relation of Spenser’s Duessa (cf. chapter V, n. 58), who transforms her lover Fradubio into a tree in punishment for having discovered her real, hideous form (she seduces him with feigned beauty). She then leaves him ‘plast in open plaines,/ Where *Boreas* doth blow full bitter bleake,/ And scorching Sunne does dry [his] secret vaines’ (*Faerie Queene*, I, II, 33). As with the ‘rotting plant’ poet of *Epipsychidion* and the ‘dead tree’ Rousseau of ‘The Triumph of Life’, the spiritual significance of this imagery is most explicitly revealed in Dante’s Wood of Suicides (*Hell*, XIII): ‘As they refused life, they remain fixed in a dead and withered sterility. They are the image of the self-hatred, which dries up the very sap of energy and makes all life infertile.’ (*Hell*, p. 153: translator’s commentary). Shelley’s similar views on self-contempt as a deadly threat to morality and spirituality are stated (cf. *Laon and Cythna*, VIII, 3379-97) and demonstrated (most graphically in *The Cenci*) throughout his literary career.

<sup>458</sup> It is possible that this image is derived from a frankly sensual equivalent in The Song of Songs 4. 11: ‘Your lips drop sweetness like the honeycomb, my bride’ (*Oxford Study Bible*, p. 696). A more contemporary source may be speculated in Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight ‘twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
[...]  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (43-54)

The *Epipsychidion* poet’s ‘Bowre of blisse’ (*Faerie Queene*, III, XII) is established as a genuine, rather than an imaginative, location: ‘[...] one of the wildest of the Sporades, which he had bought, and where he had fitted up the ruins of an old building’ (Preface to *Epipsychidion*, PP, p. 373). However, insofar as the poet transmutes this mundane setting into ‘a wreck of Paradise’ (*Epipsychidion*, 423), it is as air-built as the ‘Kubla Khan’ poet’s pleasure-dome. This correspondence, consciously or not, draws attention to the ‘narcotic’ nature of the envisioned retreat in *Epipsychidion*, in which self-willed alienation and personal pleasure there is really nothing unique or



attempt to describe his beloved.<sup>459</sup> Here, it has positive connotations,<sup>460</sup> but the correspondences between the description of the beloved and the false one are rather disturbingly prominent:

[...] from her lips, as from a hyacinth full  
 Of honey-dew, a liquid murmur drops,  
 Killing the sense with passion; [...]  
 [...]  
 And in the soul a wild odour is felt,  
 Beyond the sense, like fiery dews that melt  
 Into the bosom of a frozen bud. [...] (83-111)

Whether or not honey-dew in the first instance is synonymous with the parasitic substance of the second instance, its positive effects seem remarkably similar in terms of pure symbolism. ‘Passion’ is here taken to refer to an unqualified good, which Shelley himself certainly knew not to be the case as early as the 1811 ‘charnel-house’ letter to Hogg and as late as his depiction of a decayed Rousseau ‘overcome/ By [his] own heart alone’ (‘The Triumph of Life’, 240-1). The ‘killing air’ of this effect is here apparently desirable, although ‘Killing the sense’ (which might signify the animal senses and thus ‘unintellectual sensuality’, or might signify human reason) could as easily imply a process of insidious moral decay as of transcendence beyond the merely sensual. The resemblance of the odour (‘like fiery dews’) of this passion thawing the ‘bosom’ of the frozen bud, to the ‘killing air’ (‘like honey-dew’) of lust that cankers the bud-like ‘green heart’ of the poet, barely requires elaboration, suffice to note that the deadly, disillusioning encounter with the false one occurs after these images have been hypothetically applied to Emilia. This is not, however, to

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transcendent, nor anything that can be sustained beyond death. As is most explicitly demonstrated in ‘The Triumph of Life’, sex without spiritual love is the opium of the masses.

<sup>459</sup> The first attempt, at 53-71, only discloses, rather significantly, the poet’s ‘own infirmity’ (71).

<sup>460</sup> Crook and Guiton point out that honey-dew in the earlier context relates to nectar rather than parasite deposits. They interpret the dual use of the honey-dew image as an intentional effect, and ‘an instance of the precision of Shelley’s language.’ *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, pp. 148-9.

suggest that Emilia is a malicious presence in herself, no more than the ‘shape all light’ which offers Rousseau the true road to enlightenment. ‘To the pure’ all things may be pure (*Laon and Cythna*, Canto VI, 2596), but to the morbidly sensual and egocentric, nothing whatsoever can be of emotional or spiritual benefit.

The poet of *Epipsychidion* (and Shelley himself) is striving to define a form of sexual intercourse almost completely free from lust, as in the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks...’ (*Platonism of Shelley*, p. 410): ‘[...] the perfection of intercourse consisting, not perhaps in a total annihilation of the instinctive sense, but in reducing it to as minute a proportion as possible, compared with those higher faculties of our nature, from which it[s] derives a value.’ This, however, invites an unavoidable conflict between ideals and motives: if the desire for a sexual relationship is so overpowering as to inspire such imaginative efforts on the matter of ‘redeemed’ sexuality, and the conclusion of those efforts is that ‘The act itself is nothing’ (*ibid.*) and that sexual relations only become debased through the predominance of self-centred physical desire, the theorist is essentially no better off for his success. Sexuality may have been acquitted, but male sexual desire is now expected to give way to ‘those higher faculties of our nature’. The desire for empathy and self-transcendence must have gained primacy over ‘the instinctive sense’ if the spiritual benefits of sexuality are to be experienced, and this condition of readiness is precisely what the *Epipsychidion* poet has failed to achieve. Sexual desire is central to his world view throughout the poem, and he is incapable, as we have seen in the dubious ‘vestal sister’ passage, of conceiving spiritual and eternal bliss without referring back to the theme of transient physical ecstasy. This, as I have before noted, is a notable failing of lovers in the Gothic genre, who are infamous for imagining eternal necrophiliac embraces with their deceased partners, and more particularly it is a failure of Matilda in *Zastrozzi*, the limit of whose spiritual vision is an eternity of sexual desire and consummation (*Zastrozzi*, pp. 48-9).

Another, later Gothic protagonist gripped by a similar delusion is Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff.

The possible influence of Shelley's work upon *Wuthering Heights* has been outlined by Knoepflmacher:

Chitham suggests that the poem in which Shelley so fervently addresses another Emily – Emilia Viviani – as his “heart’s sister” acquired a special poignancy for a writer who shared Shelley’s uncompromising idealism. [...] If so, the identification can be extended to *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine tells Nelly that her soul and Heathcliff’s “are the same,” whether or not she is lawfully married to Edgar Linton. Heathcliff’s own desire for consummation with his dead soul-sister [...] is itself quintessentially Shelleian [sic.] [...]. The search for a single “Spirit within two frames” is as central to *Wuthering Heights* as it is to “Epipsychidion” or to Shelley’s earlier poem “Alastor.”<sup>461</sup>

The idealistic quest this apparently describes is belied by several factors, not least that both of the poems mentioned end in abject failure, but primarily due to the extremely morbid and sadistic nature of the character in question, predominant throughout the novel, but best illustrated by a series of graveyard incidents which he shamelessly recounts, and which alone would serve to establish the novel’s Gothic status.<sup>462</sup>

“[...] The day she was buried there came a fall of snow. In the evening I went to the churchyard. [...] Being alone, and conscious two yards of loose earth was the sole barrier between us, I said to myself, ‘I’ll have her in my arms again! If she be cold, I’ll think it is this north wind that chills *me*; and if she be motionless, it is sleep.’ I got a spade from the tool-house, and began to delve with all my might – it scraped the coffin;

<sup>461</sup> U. C. Knoepflmacher, *Wuthering Heights: A Study* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>462</sup> Ellen Dean’s comment on Heathcliff – ‘Is he a ghoul or a vampire?’ – should clear all doubt on this matter. *Wuthering Heights*, p. 273.

[...] 'If I can only get this off,' I muttered, 'I wish they may shovel in the earth over us both!'<sup>463</sup>

Oddly enough, the closest analogous incident to this ghoulish episode in Shelley's works is the ballad of the love-lorn monk in *St. Irvyne*, who violates the tomb of his late mistress or beloved. At all events, the theme persists into later works, including *Epipsychidion*: the total perversion of the meaning of love, which should (ideally) transcend the ego and effect a spiritual rapport between at least two people. The classic 'graveyard embrace' depicts love as a form of necrophiliac idolatry, in which the lover projects his ego upon the corpse of the beloved and fantasises that rapport is taking place. Hence, Heathcliff's self-deluding arguments to dismiss the coldness and inertness of Catherine's body, self-destructively demolishing his own sense of reality to gain the illusion of self-completion in a manner more graphic, but not dissimilar to that of the 'Alastor' lover. The situation in *Epipsychidion* is somewhat affected by the living and real status of the ideal beloved, but not as greatly as one might expect: for Emilia remains to the lover a focus of his personal, distorted reality, which he projects upon her until the point of catastrophic disillusionment, whereupon he loses both the self-flattering sensual illusion and the truly desirable reality of Uranian love and absolute beauty.

The central love affair of *Wuthering Heights*, with its dubious claims to predominant spirituality and distinct overtones of incest,<sup>464</sup> not to mention the unmistakably Byronic or male-

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., p. 241-2.

<sup>464</sup> Elizabeth MacAndrew insists that there is no actual incest depicted in *Wuthering Heights*, although the close childhood relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine leaves the impression 'that their love as adults has a suggestion of incest about it.' (*The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, p. 203) An alternative argument is, however, perfectly feasible. I am indebted to Sheenagh Pugh (University of Glamorgan) for supplying the following:

"[...] because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same. [...] I am Heathcliff!" [*Wuthering Heights*, pp. 80-1] In the same speech Cathy refers to Hindley as "the wicked man in there" – rather pointedly, not as her brother. Because, estranged from him, she doesn't want him to be? Or because in her heart she feels someone else is? Everything Cathy says of Heathcliff in that speech could be interpreted as romantic flights of fancy about predestined soul-mates. But Cathy isn't that kind of a girl and *Wuthering Heights* isn't that kind of a book: it is far more down-to-earth. Cathy "loves" Heathcliff, but "not because he's handsome"; indeed she does not state that there is any sexual component in her feelings. She feels an affinity with him, so much so that it is as if they are made of the same stuff. Well, maybe they are. Old Mr Earnshaw presumably goes away on business regularly,

Gothic status of the anti-hero lover, is in no doubt a response to earlier Romantic depictions of love or sexuality centred around such figures. Heathcliff's sadism and blatantly hubristic revenge-seeking<sup>465</sup> dominate his character and actions for most of the novel, and the thought of this apparent amalgam of Montoni, Zastrozzi, the necrophiliac monk, and Count Cenci (to name a few) being a participant in any genuinely spiritual relationship defies credulity. This is surely intentional, and leads into a comparison of the conflicted, traumatic relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, and those which Shelley's 'lone poet' figures enact – to their downfall – with ideal fantasies and malign apparitions. Whereas Catherine Earnshaw/ Linton could hardly be described as a selfless, idealised abstraction, she demonstrates a genuine empathy and spirituality<sup>466</sup> that Heathcliff – always an intensely physical and egocentric character – never comes close to, in spite of their supposed rapport. His emphasis upon his own emotional and spiritual dependency,<sup>467</sup> which he

and if he is at all acquainted with the Liverpool of his day he must have seen plenty of starving children. But this one he brings home, being resolved that "he would not leave it as he found it" [p. 45]. He is an austere, unsentimental man, but this child winds itself around his heart to the displacement of his own son. It must at least be possible that there is another reason, which he tells nobody, namely that he has some cause to believe the child is his. When, on the last night of his life, his daughter teasingly asks, "Why cannot you always be a good man, father?" [p. 50] he is upset, perhaps by her impertinence but perhaps also because she has unintentionally struck a seam of guilt. Cathy and Heathcliff were brought up as brother and sister; any sexual relationship between them would be a form of social incest even were they unrelated. But I think it's at least possible it would be literally so. It is interesting that Cathy, for all sorts of practical reasons, shies away from marrying Heathcliff; he may want that but she prefers to marry someone else and use his money to help Heathcliff – as you would naturally do for your kin, if you loved them enough. Nor is she jealous of his connection with Isabella. In her heart she is more sister than lover.

<sup>465</sup> *Wuthering Heights*, p. 64: Heathcliff refers to the 'satisfaction' he will feel in revenge (whereas God, receiving no satisfaction, therefore has less entitlement to minister punishment). The sentiment seems even more extreme, though similar, to Count Cenci's 'He does his will, I mine!' (*The Cenci*, IV. i. 139).

<sup>466</sup> *Wuthering Heights*: '[...] surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation, if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, [...]' (p. 81) In reference to her own death, with echoes of the *Phaedo* (pp. 133-4): '[...] the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I'm tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world [...]' There is little doubt that Catherine's moral failings chiefly arise from resentment at the constraints placed upon her by social convention (particularly her husband's refusal to tolerate her – as far as she is concerned – Platonic relations with Heathcliff), but her moral antithesis to Heathcliff is amply illustrated in the relation she gives of a childhood incident, in which she and Heathcliff discover a nest of lapwings (p. 113). Catherine expresses compassion for the birds. Heathcliff gratuitously sets a trap to ensure that the chicks starve to death. Any apparent association between Heathcliff and the moorland setting does not, evidently, detract from his alienation from both nature and humanity. Catherine is a genuinely Romantic figure, whereas Heathcliff is an exemplary Gothic antihero, and *Wuthering Heights* involves itself in much the same discourse as so many of Shelley's works: in establishing the apparently close association between the two genres, whilst simultaneously establishing their fundamental opposition. Catherine is alienated by force, but Heathcliff by choice.

<sup>467</sup> There is a distinction to be made between realising one's spiritual dependency on a higher order and the egotistic urge to reverse the progressive isolation of one's birth and adulthood, which casts further doubt on the already suspect 'idealistic sibling incest' trope. Note the use of the catacombs as a 'nursery' in *The Monk* (pp. 351-4), and as the site where Ambrosio rapes his sister (pp. 324-30), suggesting the ironic, suicidal analogy between tomb and

fervently supposes that Catherine will fulfil, is reminiscent of the false, conditional empathy of the ‘Alastor’ poet (who likewise spurns all of humanity except for a single ideal figure – who proves to be a fantasy in any case), and his graveyard ventures put the supposedly spiritual nature of his love in serious question. That he relents from this implicit necrophiliac act, under the posthumous influence of Catherine (pp. 242-3), possibly signifies the beginnings of a gradual spiritual recovery, although the evidence is never more than tenuous, and his abandonment of vindictive cruelty through sheer apathy (p. 268) carries rather less moral conviction than that of Frankenstein’s creature, although the comparison between the two is apposite, as Knoepflmacher argues: ‘Like the single-named Heathcliff, this nameless being becomes a revengeful male sadist when denied a sister-bride [...]. Thwarted in their own childlike yearning for a female other, both Heathcliff and Frankenstein’s creature resent their own socialization.’<sup>468</sup>

The reference to *Frankenstein* is to the creature’s demand that Frankenstein ‘create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being.’ (p. 144) This artificial ‘epipsyche’ is constructed by the same ghoulish methods as the creature itself, and this fairly explicit necrophilia of two supreme male egotists dabbling with female cadavers to

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womb that *Wuthering Heights* later develops upon. Cf. Stevie Davies, ‘The Language of Familial Desire’, in *New Casebooks: Wuthering Heights*, ed. Patsy Stoneman (Hampshire & London: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 161-75. Davies emphasises the retrogressive, ‘childish’ personalities of Brontë’s characters, and links this to the morbidity and self-destruction inherent in the central relationship:

[...] the supposed adults [...] are only children in disguise. The level of infantilism within their speech-patterns is high. At heart, the novel implies, people don’t change; growth is superficial, culture is shallow and easy to erode. (p. 163)

The ease with which we embrace the unregenerate egos of Catherine and Heathcliff [...] indicates our readiness to be seduced back into the pagan hinterland of the mind’s past. (p. 164)

[In reference to Heathcliff’s breakdown and death] Death as a release from this galled and excoriated nervous condition is apprehended by the novel as rest and succour in a mother-world which resolves the conflicts of the upper world in a completion born not of settling scores by bargain or forgiveness [...] but by entering into the being of the beloved, in shared sleep. Heathcliff’s ‘transformation’ [...] into the substance of Catherine underground [...] is the falling asleep of a lifelong insomniac, entering into the balm of the subliminal world, which gives entire permission to his every desire by abolishing in its entirety the wordy, needy self. [...] Burying their individualities in itself, the moor takes its children home. (p. 173)

In light of this, the *Epipsyichidion* poet’s desire ‘Would we two had been twins of the same mother!’ (45) carries an extreme weight of retrograde, unreformed ego.

<sup>468</sup> *Wuthering Heights: A Study*, p. 36.

design an 'ideal' sexual partner reflects as negatively on the creator as on the would-be recipient. The female corpse they envision as the end of their mutual problems stands as a gruesome, mocking indictment of the morbid, masochistic extreme to which their Rousseau-like rejection of genuine human sympathies has taken them. This is of course rather more forgivable from the spurned creature's standpoint, although it is left to the actively anti-social Frankenstein to point out the dubious ethics of the creature's desire to essentially possess its female 'counterpart': a matter which she will not, apparently, be consulted upon (p. 165). As an image of the morbid tendency of male sexuality (and more generally, Pandemian love) to attempt to claim, control, and silence the female/beloved, and in doing so to extinguish all genuine sympathy (all protestations notwithstanding), this is at the very least on a par with the 'lank and cold and blue' corpse of Cythna (*Laon and Cythna*, III, 1333).

Considering the nature of the creature's desire – to materially 'construct' and dominate an ideal 'epipsyche,' and withdraw from human society in its company – we find a fascinating and grotesque precedent for the supposedly idyllic retreat of *Epipsychidion*. Although Shelley's poet does not literally create Emilia from the dead, there is the suggestion of a similarly domineering, morbid process of artificial animation in 'the net of grand but empty abstractions the verse casts in its futile effort to contain her'.<sup>469</sup> This refers to the poet's unsuccessful attempt to find a precise definition for his ideal beloved, resulting in a 'flow of epithets,'<sup>470</sup> none of which seem to satisfactorily encompass the quality of transcendence; no doubt because they are all unavoidably drawn from the mortal 'world of fancies' (*Epipsychidion*, 70). Although enlightenment entails acceptance of the intangible, indefinable nature of post-mortal existence, the poet takes the route of hubris (which is the route of both Heathcliff, and more obviously of Frankenstein), attempting to know that which only God can know: the exact definition of absolute beauty. In spite of declaring

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<sup>469</sup> Stuart M Sperry, *Shelley's Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 161.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

his dependence upon Emilia,<sup>471</sup> the poet otherwise aspires to a state of spiritual self-sufficiency in his essentially unaltered form.<sup>472</sup> Thus symbolically, and not unlike his clearly Gothic predecessor, he attempts to fabricate an ideal mate and soul-mate from the sub-standard materials afforded by metaphor and simile. Alternatively put, he misuses ‘the metaphoric power of the poetic imagination’<sup>473</sup> in an effort to seduce a truly ideal figure, intending to limit this precious resource of Uranian love to himself alone: theoretically impossible by his own standards, since love becomes Pandemian as soon as it becomes limited and possessive.<sup>474</sup> Ultimately, it seems the best that can be said of the *Epipsychidion* poet is that he is yet another Saint-Preux, with a sincere urge to experience a form of love that transcends the mundane, but shackled by conventional limiting ideologies of love and male sexuality, which are so Satanically insidious that he fails to even note their predominance over him, when he thought he had renounced them.

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As we have noted, the morbid despair, and processes of ‘sinking’ and ‘annihilation’ which bring *Epipsychidion* to its ironic close, serve as the opening images of *Adonais*: ‘O, weep for Adonais – he is dead! [...] dream not that the amorous Deep/ Will yet restore him to the vital air;/ Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair’ (19-27). The personification of death – linked with love – is significant in *Epipsychidion*, and the false one is implicitly an incarnation of death (or Life-in-Death, at all events). This is carried further in *Adonais*, as a mocking, sadistic, pseudo-vampiric female Thanatos becomes the would-be ‘Pandemian lover’ of Adonais, threatening to separate him from his muse and mother, Urania.<sup>475</sup> In this event, however, and in spite of the

<sup>471</sup> Although he does qualify this: ‘I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*.’ (52) This is rather more than Dante presumes with Beatrice. Uranian love being the process rather than the condition of enlightenment, there is already a hint of dangerous complacency in this declaration.

<sup>472</sup> See Rousseau’s version of the ‘egotistic sublime’ in *Reveries*, pp. 88-9, which led to the pitying yet merciless parody that is ‘Alastor’ and quite possibly to the island of *Epipsychidion*:

[...] if there is a state where the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there, [...] as long as this state lasts, we can call ourselves happy, [...] Such is the state which I often experienced on the Island of Saint-Pierre in my solitary reveries [...] as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God.

<sup>473</sup> Sperry, p. 161.

<sup>474</sup> By the poet’s own standards, stated in *Epipsychidion*, 149-89.

<sup>475</sup> Reiman and Powers, (*PP*, p. 392, n. 5) and Carlos Baker (*Shelley’s Major Poetry*, p. 241) interpret this figure two



poet-narrator's despair, it ultimately transpires that the spiritual resilience of Uranian love (represented in both Urania and her 'son' – presumably signifying her best disciple or advocate)<sup>476</sup> is actually stronger than death: a hypothesis which *Epipsychidion* by no means adequately tested. Even before the 'apotheosis' of Adonais (which dominates from 343 to the end, at 495), Death 'herself' is confused and eclipsed in the presence of Adonais and Urania, if hardly conquered:

Within the twilight chamber spreads apace  
 The shadow of white Death, and at the door  
 Invisible corruption waits to trace  
 His extreme way to her dim dwelling-place;  
 The eternal Hunger sits, but pity and awe  
 Soothe her pale rage, nor dares she to deface  
 So fair a prey, till darkness, and the law  
 Of change, shall o'er his sleep the mortal curtain draw. (65-72)

This 'tryst' between Death and Adonais 'Within the twilight chamber' is of a rather grotesquely intimate nature, and the image is resumed and developed at 217-25, as Urania bursts into her son's 'chamber'. Death's evident embarrassment at being discovered 'with' Adonais,<sup>477</sup> momentarily dragging his elegy down to the level of some illicit juvenile liaison, is startlingly incongruous, calling to mind the process of 'The Mask of Anarchy' in which grand allegorical figures are reduced to the level of contemporary politicians. The scene bears a disconcerting

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ways: as the muse of astronomy (invoked by Milton at *Paradise Lost*, VII, 1-39) and the Uranian Aphrodite, to distinguish her, in Baker's words, from 'the lower or Cyprian Aphrodite' in Bion's 'Lament for Adonis' (120 B.C. *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse*, pp. 343-6). Milton Wilson asserts that the latter interpretation is irrelevant (*Shelley's Later Poetry*, p. 237), but given Shelley's undoubted attachment to the *Symposium*, I see no necessity to dismiss it altogether.

<sup>476</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, p. 241: 'The obvious reason for presenting this goddess as enamoured of Keats is that his poems had helped, as Shelley saw them, to spread the doctrine of love of which he was himself so ardent a champion.'

<sup>477</sup> 'Death/ Shamed by the presence of that living Might/ Blushed to annihilation' (217-9).

resemblance to Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth*, in which the mother bursts in upon the chambers of her prospective son-in-law to find him commingling with a vampire (her late elder daughter, in fact): a process which promptly kills him.<sup>478</sup> In Goethe's poem, the mother is a most decidedly Uranian figure: an implicit enemy of love who consigns her daughter to chastity and holy orders, against her daughter's will, which results in her death. In Shelley's version, the youth remains at least spiritually loyal to his mother (Urania), even if the vampire Death does get to make free with his corpse. It is, however, an ironic turnabout that now Death herself is the only necrophiliac, Pandemian lover in the picture, whilst Adonais, unlike so many other Shelleyan protagonists in the presence of the Common Aphrodite, is a passive but pure victim. As *Adonais* later asserts, ' 'tis Death is dead, not he' (361). Physical death is inevitable, hence the startling 'rape' of *Adonais* in his tomb, but spiritual death is always consensual, and Adonais does not – after the fashion of the *Epipsychidion* poet – embrace his destroyer and all she stands for. All she and the rest of the world are left with is the carrion.

Another, and perhaps more significant influence for this image of a female Death is to be found in Petrarch's 'Triumph of Death,' in which the fearless presence of Laura – herself a representative of ideal and spiritual love – proves somewhat discomfiting for the typically ruthless figure of Death, who is forced into abandoning her own authoritative bearing and attempting to seduce Laura into dying:

So in a doubting pause, this cruel dame  
 A little stay'd, [...]  
 [...]  
 Then with less fierce aspect, she said, "Thou guide  
 Of this fair crew, hast not my strength assay'd,  
 Let her advise, who may command, prevent

<sup>478</sup> Goethe: *Selected Poems*, pp. 132-43.

Decrepit age, 'tis but a punishment;  
 From me this honour thou alone shalt have,  
 Without or fear or pain, to find thy grave."<sup>479</sup>

It is almost superfluous to state that the demise of this youthful mediator between humanity and the divine beauty, at the hands of a powerful – but ultimately subordinate – female Death, is a clear precursor of the death of Adonais.

In fact, Petrarch's Laura accepts death with stoical resignation, making quite clear that Death has no influence over her soul, which passes on without despair – fear of death being itself a symptom of sensual corruption and egotism. In her own words, 'Death to the good a dreary prison opes,/ But to the vile and base, who all their hopes/ And cares below have fix'd, is full of fear' (*Triumphs*, p. 320). On this account, Laura expresses more fear for the poet-lover she will leave behind, deprived of her spiritual influence: '[...] there is one/ Who will be deeply grieved when I am gone,/ His happiness doth on my life depend,/ I shall find freedom in a peaceful end.' (p. 316) The lament of the 'fair dames, that wept about her hearse' (p. 318) provides confirmation of the beneficence lost to the world through Laura's demise: 'Courtesy, Virtue, Beauty, all are lost;/ What shall become of us? None else can boast/ Such high perfection; no more we shall/ Hear her wise words, nor the angelical/ Sweet music of her voice.' (ibid.) This sentiment compares with that of the narrator of *Adonais*, lamenting the predicament of a world from which Adonais has passed, albeit in rather more graphic, necrotic terms.<sup>480</sup>

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep –

He hath awakened from the dream of life –

<sup>479</sup> *Triumphs*, p. 316.

<sup>480</sup> It also compares with the laments of Dante in *La Vita Nuova*, XXXI, p. 83: 'Beatrice has gone to Paradise on high/ Among the angels in the realm of peace,/ And you, ladies, she has left comfortless. [...] Because our grievous life He [God] saw to be/ Unfit for such a noble thing as she.'

'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep  
 With phantoms an unprofitable strife,  
 And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife  
 Invulnerable nothings. – *We* decay  
 Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief  
 Convulse us and consume us day by day,  
 And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

[...]

Envy and calumny and hate and pain,  
 And that unrest which men miscall delight,  
 Can touch him not and torture not again; (343-55)

The obviously sexual 'unrest which men miscall delight' (presumably one of the maggot-like 'cold hopes' preying on the human soul) is the standard Platonic condemnation of sensual pleasure as being no pleasure at all, but simply the 'cessation of pain' (*Republic*, p. 409) which is occasioned by desire. Not only is this a consistent element of Shelley's representations of conventional (i.e. corrupt to the core) sexuality throughout his career – indeed, the very image so grotesquely rendered in the frenzied 'lover's pageant' of 'The Triumph of Life' – but it is also a standard quality of 'love' in the Gothic.<sup>481</sup> Such desire is, at all events, inescapable except through death – even for the genuine Uranian or philosophic lover – but since such spiritual pursuits will (ideally) lead to 'pleasures which do not grow out of pains' (*ibid.*), their adherent will at least die free from the illusion that all pleasures are purely self-centred, sensual, and transient experiences.

<sup>481</sup> See the first awakening of Ambrosio's passion in *The Monk*: '[...] a sensation till then unknown filled his heart with a mixture of anxiety and delight; a raging fire shot through every limb; the blood boiled in his veins, and a thousand wild wishes bewildered his imagination.' (p. 60) Shelley indulges in similarly painful-sounding similes in *Zastrozzi*: '[...] her soul, shook by contending paroxysms of the passion which consumed her, was transported by unutterable ecstasies of delirious and maddening love.' (p. 61) 'The fire of voluptuous, of maddening love scorched his veins [...].' (p. 79)

Shaking off that illusion – as Dantean a concept as it is Platonic, considering the hideously ironic ‘punishments’<sup>482</sup> of upper Hell – is thus essential preparation for passing on.

This is, indeed, the illusion the *Epipsychidion* lover maintains right up to the point of his figurative ‘expiry.’ Likewise, the lovers who follow Life’s chariot, and more particularly the shade of Rousseau. It is, on the other hand, no illusion to the unashamedly suicidal lover of ‘Invocation to Misery’, who takes his transient and rather sordid pleasures prior to embracing inevitable physical decay and oblivion. Having died whilst clearly in Urania’s favour, Adonais’ fate is to be envied rather than mourned, as the narrator clarifies in comparing Adonais to various notable poets who died young, before ‘the contagion of the world’s slow stain’ (356) was able to reduce them to cynicism, self-interest and sensualism – ‘A heart grown cold, a head grown grey in vain’<sup>483</sup> (358):

The inheritors of unfulfilled renown  
 Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought,  
 Far in the Unapparent. Chatterton  
 Rose pale, his solemn agony had not  
 Yet faded from him; Sidney, as he fought  
 And as he fell and as he lived and loved  
 Sublimely mild, a spirit without spot,  
 Arose; and Lucan, by his death approved:  
 Oblivion as they rose shrank like thing reproved. (397-405)

<sup>482</sup> In summary, the Black Wind in which the lustful are driven (*Hell*, V); the rain-soaked mire in which the gluttonous wallow, mauled by Cerberus (VI); the eternal, futile brawl of the hoarders and spendthrifts; and the marsh in which the wrathful are plunged, attacking one another or seething with hatred on the marsh-bed (VII). These conditions approximate the keen and painful desires of their relative sins/ sensual pleasures, which are after all the main part of the experience which culminates in the moment of ‘relief’ – there is, of course, no relief in Hell. This illustrates the essential futility of a life spent in efforts to cultivate painful experiences only to negate them. Taking Hell out of the equation, such a life is implicitly suicidal (Death being the ultimate ‘relief’) and evidently masochistic. The *Epipsychidion* lover’s attempt to eternally draw out a moment of ‘relief’ was doomed to failure.

<sup>483</sup> It is probable that Shelley here had in mind certain poets who, having not died young, had most definitely in his eyes fallen victim to the ‘world’s slow stain’ and given up their youthful idealism. Most obviously, Southey and Wordsworth. On the other hand, as I have before stated, Shelley was generally sceptical of moral and spiritual integrity surviving into old age.

In contrast to this catalogue of young, bright, untainted souls whose existence defies ‘Oblivion’ (for their not, presumably, having had sufficient time to become addicted to sensual pleasures which embrace negation, physicality, and transience) stands the allegorical self-portrait of Shelley himself, inserted among the mourners of Adonais (at 271-306) as a figure of astonishing moral ambiguity: ‘[...] his branded and ensanguined brow [...] like Cain’s or Christ’s’ (305-6).<sup>484</sup> This irreverent fusion implies an amalgam of futile idealism and martyrdom, underlain by egotism and self-contempt, bearing in mind both Byron’s representation of a sympathetic but self-absorbed *Cain*, and Shelley’s own representation of Christ’s Passion in *Prometheus Unbound*:

[...] let that thorn-wounded brow  
 Stream not with blood – it mingles with thy tears!  
 [...]  
 [...] Thy name I will not speak,  
 It hath become a curse. I see, I see  
 The wise, the mild, the lofty and the just,  
 Whom thy slaves hate for being like to thee,  
 Some hunted by foul lies from their heart’s home,  
 [...]  
 As hooded ounces cling to the driven hind,  
 Some linked to corpses in unwholesome cells:

(*Prometheus Unbound*, 598-610)

<sup>484</sup> A conceit which has attracted its fair share of criticism, described by Bonca as a ‘hubristic gesture’ and a ‘narcissistic merger’ (*Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 42). Baker, whilst acknowledging a standard tendency to view this scene as ‘mere sentimental egotism,’ defends it on the grounds of ‘an extraordinary complex of ethical attitudes, literary and mythological images, and semiprivate symbolism.’ (*Shelley’s Major Poetry*, p. 243) In absolute fairness, the self-deprecating representation of the elegist himself among the mourners is a stock pastoral device. See *Lycidas*, 186-93, where Milton portrays his own character (the poet-narrator) as an ‘uncouth swain.’ Milton, judging from the citations made in the early stages of *Adonais* (28-36, and the appropriation of Urania as a muse for Adonais), was certainly much on Shelley’s mind at this time.

Although, in this instance, ‘linked to corpses in unwholesome cells’ is not explicitly sexual, it can hardly avoid conjuring associations with the aforementioned ‘necrophiliac kiss’ in *Laon and Cythna*. At all events, it stands as a further affirmation of the efforts of ‘anarchs’ and hypocrites to pressure a dying breed of idealists into ‘embracing’ sin, death, or both.

The image of the hunted deer (‘driven hind’) is revived in ‘The Triumph of Life’,<sup>485</sup> clearly representing the destruction or subsuming of Rousseau’s youthful idealism or innocence by the wolfish, cynical lust and misanthropy of his later life. The occurrence of the same image in *Adonais* may thus be interpreted as an image of external persecution, internal corruption, or both:

Midst others of less note, came one frail Form,  
 A phantom among men; companionless  
 As the last cloud of an expiring storm  
 Whose thunder is its knell; he, as I guess,  
 Had gazed on Nature’s naked loveliness,  
 Actæon-like, and now he fled astray  
 With feeble steps o’er the world’s wilderness,  
 And his own thoughts, along that rugged way,  
 Pursued, like raging hounds, their father and their prey. (271-9)

The pursuit of this frail, half-dead self-image by its ‘own thoughts’ could simply imply that the poet-narrator/ Shelley, having dared – like *Adonais* – to produce works which show nature in its true light (‘stripped’ of conventional codes and ethics), is suffering the same fate: exile, opprobrium, and life-threatening despair.<sup>486</sup> The voyeuristic image, however, is uncomfortably familiar from

<sup>485</sup> ‘The Triumph of Life’, 405-10.

<sup>486</sup> This is certainly a factor, to judge from 299-300: ‘[...] well knew that gentle band/ Who in another’s fate now wept his own [...]’

*Epipsychidion*, in the poet's 'naked bride' depiction of the island, and since the poet is evidently pursued by his thoughts – as opposed to their results – it seems apparent that his 'raging hounds' are, or were, of the same nature as Rousseau's 'fierce wolf': the soul-corroding sensual desires and passions – both self-love and self-contempt – with which beauty inspires the egotistic Pandemian lover.<sup>487</sup> Nor is the term 'phantom among men' at all auspicious, considering Shelley's long-term connection of this Gothic image with the shadow-puppets of Plato's *Republic* and the drifting graveyard entities of the *Phaedo*, signifying in 'Invocation to Misery' and 'The Triumph of Life' the 'unreality,' malign spiritual effects, and ultimate futility of sensual and worldly pursuits. The following stanza at least establishes that this 'Love in desolation masked' (281) is not corrupted to the core, after the all-too-likely fashion of the *Epipsychidion* poet. Keeping with the botanical imagery, we may find an earlier example of such self-deprecation ultimately avoiding the *Epipsychidion* slough of despond in the closing invocation of 'Ode to the West Wind':

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

What if my leaves are falling like its own!

The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe

Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

('Ode to the West Wind,' 57-64)

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<sup>487</sup> Shelley's *Venomed Melody*, p. 173: 'The hounds are, of course, his own guilt and sense of failure.'



Reiman and Powers compare this forest of dead leaves – the ‘Pestilence-stricken multitudes’<sup>488</sup> – to the dark wood of the *Inferno*,<sup>489</sup> in which Dante finds himself – at middle-age, long deprived of the living influence of Beatrice – spiritually ‘lost’ (cf. *Hell*, Canto I). In the words of the *Epipsychidion* poet, ‘the wintry forest of our life’ (*Epipsychidion*, 249). This hazard-strewn symbolic landscape is heavily reiterated in later allegories such as the *Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*,<sup>490</sup> and George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*. Shelley’s positioning of himself as a bare tree or a dead leaf within this context is certainly self-deprecation, but is no more a despairing gesture than the opening of the *Commedia*, before Beatrice and Virgil conspire to guide Dante out of the wilderness and towards redemption.

Neither the decaying, lethargic forest, nor the regenerative wind are in evidence in the landscape of *Adonais*, but there is a distinct suggestion that, in order to attend at the funeral of Adonais, the Shelley-mourner has passed through that forest. At all events, his ceremonial spear<sup>491</sup> is ‘Yet dripping with the forest’s noonday dew,’ (293) symbolically suggesting his recent involvement in the ‘sexual error’ (*Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 177) of Pandemian love:<sup>492</sup> an impression already created by the depiction of this figure as a smaller version of the ‘dead tree’

<sup>488</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, X, 4181-4: ‘Madness, and Fear, and Plague, and Famine still/ Heaped corpse on corpse, as in autumnal woods/ The frosts of many a wind with dead leaves fill/ Earth’s cold and sullen brooks [...]’ Mass pestilence is also a punishment found in the *Inferno*, canto XXIX-XXX, for the falsifiers. Cf. *Hell*, p. 256, translator’s commentary:

[...] this is at one level the image of the corrupt heart which acknowledges no obligation to keep faith with its fellow-men; at another, it is the image of a diseased society in the last stages of its mortal sickness and already necrosing. Every value it has is false; it alternates between a deadly lethargy and a raging insanity. [...] the “general bond of love and nature’s tie” [...] is utterly dissolved.

<sup>489</sup> *PP*, p. 223, n. 6.

<sup>490</sup> *Paradise Lost*, I, 301-4, describing the rebel host on the lake of fire: ‘His legions, angel forms, who lay entranced/ Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks/ In Vallombrosa, where th’ Etrurian shades/ High overarched embow’r [...]’

<sup>491</sup> A fairly explicit phallic symbol. Cf. *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 176:

He is carrying the phallic thyrsus, ‘topped with a cypress cone’, the cypress being sacred to Venus and a concomitant of Adonis’ funeral rites. It is one ‘Round whose rude shaft dark ivy tresses grew / Yet dripping with the forest’s noonday dew’ (291-2). Ivy is a female symbol in Shelley; it is almost always present among the twining plants which form part of the description of the cave or forest solitude where true lovers perform their mysterious rites, and the noonday forest and the dew similarly have sexual connotations.

<sup>492</sup> *Shelley’s Venomed Melody*, p. 144 (in reference to *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iv, 36-9): ‘The wood or forest represents life, as it does in Dante, Spenser and Milton, but here it is also more specifically sexual experience and experimentation.’

Rousseau<sup>493</sup> withered by the light of life: ‘On the withering flower/ The killing sun smiles brightly’ (286-7). Whereas the sun can act as an image for the divine beauty – as in ‘The Triumph of Life’ and Plato’s *Republic* – its present significance (echoing the ‘killing air’ of *Epipsychidion*’s false one: another plant-parasite) is quite the opposite, the sunlight itself having been physically corrupted in its descent to the severely Platonic world of *Adonais*: ‘Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,/ Stains the white radiance of Eternity,/ Until Death tramples it to fragments.’ (462-4) Distorted by the ‘atmosphere/ Of stormy mist’ (205-6), the true ‘radiance of Eternity’ is obscured by its own earthly manifestation: the ‘cold glare’ of life,<sup>494</sup> as Urania is obscured by ‘sorrow and fear’ (204): evidently, all we have access to on earth are tainted reflections of absolute beauty and divine love, which would certainly constitute a good reason to envy the fate of Adonais, who has remained within Urania’s good graces. This is more than can be said of Shelley’s poet-mourner, whom she does not even recognise (302-3).

A would-be Dante thus deprived of the acknowledgement of his Beatrice would seem at least a redeemable case.<sup>495</sup> If we choose to definitively link the narrative voice of *Adonais* with the poet-mourner (which is certainly the case in *Lycidas*) this is confirmed in his final gesture of turning to the departed Adonais as a spiritual exemplar and guide. In a fascinating turnabout – eluding the insidious encroachments of Pandemian love which tend to plague the relationships of ‘ideal’ Shelleyan lovers – the poet-pilgrim switches the focus of his empathy and spiritual longing from the

<sup>493</sup> Not only a victim of the dark forest, but part of it, since his writings as a reformer had been judged as deeply reactionary and even downright perverse by Shelley and Wollstonecraft. Shelley does not go so far in his own chastisement: whatever personal guilt he purports to suffer from, as a poet at least he has been a ‘lamp,’ albeit now a ‘dying’ one (284) to his fellow-men. Since Adonais himself is a beacon (495), I find no grounds for a more negative interpretation of this image.

<sup>494</sup> ‘The Triumph of Life’, 77-9: ‘And a cold glare, intenser than the noon/ But icy cold, obscured with [...] light/ The Sun as he the stars.’

<sup>495</sup> *Vita Nuova*, X-XII (pp. 40-5): Beatrice withholds her ‘sweetest greeting’ (p. 40) from Dante, whose feigned intimacy with another lady has led to widespread innuendoes. He withdraws into solitude and despondency, until experiencing a vision in which Love (personified) addresses him: ‘*Fili mi, tempus est ut praetermictantur simulcra nostra.*’ [‘My son, it is time for our false images to be put aside.’] (p. 42). These ‘false images’ – [...] presumably the screen ladies to whom Dante has shown love in order to keep secret his love for Beatrice’ (p. 109) – obviously have potential Platonic resonance within a work such as *Adonais*. Assuming this is an intentional allusion to Dante – who is certainly in Shelley’s thoughts at this time, judging from the echoes of the *Paradiso* at 478-95 – Urania’s curt treatment of the poet-mourner may be more auspicious than it looks: for even if it seems he has physically erred from the path of Uranian love at some point, it implies that his intentions have never wavered from it, and hope still remains if he will renounce all ‘false images’ of love.

female Urania to her son. This instantly negates the spiritual threat of even posthumous sexual urges arising to contaminate the spiritual rapport.<sup>496</sup> In an unexpectedly absolute agreement with the *Symposium*, Shelley determines that whilst any heterosexual relationship, whatever the character of the lovers involved, is bound to raise the possibility of descent into mere Pandemian sensuality, the admiration and sympathy of one like-minded poet for another will always remain ‘pure.’ The fact that this places Adonais/ Keats in the unlikely role of a ‘male Beatrice’ is, of necessity, disconcerting, although the symbolically raped and victimised Adonais is certainly (like Laon) a rather emasculated male figure:<sup>497</sup>

‘Tis Adonais calls! oh, hasten thither,

[...]

The breath whose might I have invoked in song

Descends on me; my spirit’s bark is driven,

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<sup>496</sup> Taking into account Shelley’s stated profound distaste of physical homosexual love in the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks...’ *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 411:

We are not exactly aware, – and the laws of modern composition scarcely permit a modest writer to investigate the subject with philosophical accuracy, – what that action was by which the Greeks expressed this passion. I am persuaded that it was totally different from the ridiculous and disgusting conceptions which the vulgar have formed on the subject, at least among the more debased and abandoned of mankind. It is impossible that a lover could usually have subjected the object of his attachment to so detestable a violation or have consented to associate his own remembrance in the beloved mind with images of pain and horror.

Whilst Shelley’s squeamishness on this point invites little enough comment, it is at least worth noting that Socrates’ rebuttal of Alcibiades’ advances (*Symposium*, pp. 103-7) appears to advocate sexual abstinence in all forms as the proper, or ultimate practice of the philosophic lover.

<sup>497</sup> ‘Emasculated’ may not be entirely the appropriate term in light of Shelley’s activist interests, clearly establishing his intention to expose the ‘crimes of convention’ which had rigidly set arbitrary values of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’ I am satisfied that Shelley did not actually believe that men were ‘naturally’ born to be as aggressive and emotionally isolated as the average Gothic antihero: rather, that this was an ingrained social imposition. Nevertheless, he was certainly intent upon elevating alternative male role-models that embraced conventionally ‘feminine’ values. Cf. *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love*, p. 19:

The exaltation of passivity in Shelley’s works – and this includes the sexual passivity embodied by male protagonists such as the *Alastor* poet and Prometheus – seems, then, to have its roots in Shelley’s early fascination with Jesus’ passive, selfless suffering on the Cross. [...] In part because of the poet’s own temperamental and even physical affinities with the feminine gender [...]. Moreover, at the same time that his desire to embody such qualities himself escalates [...] so does his need to project them onto others increase in intensity.

Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng  
 Whose sails were never to the tempest given;  
 The massy earth and sphered skies are riven!  
 I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar:  
 Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
 The soul of Adonais, like a star,  
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (476-95)

Substantial echoes of the *Paradiso*<sup>498</sup> and the ‘sphered skies’ confirm the new role of Adonais as a rather androgynous Beatrice or Uranian Aphrodite. Whereas the poet of *Epipsychidion* ironically, and much to his disappointment, drags his spiritually idealised beloved down to the level of the earthly, the poet of *Adonais* is aware that the spiritual ecstasy sought throughout the former work is ‘hardly practicable’<sup>499</sup> in life, and must be looked for in whatever state is to follow. Accordingly, he seeks his ‘epipsyche’ not in a sexually-attainable being whom – he supposes – resembles the genius of Dante’s third sphere descended to earth, but in one who has ascended to that status. In the words of the dead young poets, ‘It was for thee [Adonais] yon kingless sphere has long/ Swung blind in unascended majesty,/ Silent alone amid an Heaven of song./ Assume thy winged throne, thou Vesper of our throng!’ (411-4). This unequivocally links Adonais with the

<sup>498</sup> *Paradiso*, II, 1-7 (pp. 14-15):

O Voi che siete in piccioletta barca,  
 desiderosi d’ ascoltar, seguiti  
 dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,  
 tornate a riveder li vostri liti:  
 non vi mettete in pelago, chè, forse,  
 perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.  
 L’ acqua ch’ io prendo già mai non si corse.

O Ye, embarked in a small skiff, who long  
 To listen, having followed on its way  
 My boat, that goes continuing in song,  
 Turn again home to sight of shore and bay!  
 Trust not the deep; for peradventure there  
 By losing me ye might be left astray.  
 The sea I sail none yet did ever dare.

<sup>499</sup> Preface to *Epipsychidion* in *PP*, p. 373.

figure of the Heavenly Venus.<sup>500</sup> For once, as far as Shelley himself is concerned, only a spiritual relationship is viable or even thinkable with the pseudo-divine incarnation.

Bonca's discussion of the figure of the 'feminized Christ' as the 'quintessential emblem of Shelley's lifelong struggle against (masculine) selfhood'<sup>501</sup> clearly implies this interpretation. The depiction of Adonais as a rather unsuccessful Redcrosse Knight<sup>502</sup> and victimised martyr establishes his Christ-like status, and the unmistakable echoes of the *Paradiso* confirm a strenuous effort on the part of his author to construct the ideal figure of both a redeemer and a Platonic or mystical lover. Notwithstanding Shelley's early condemnation of chastity as 'a monkish and evangelical superstition, a greater foe to natural temperance even than unintellectual sensuality,'<sup>503</sup> *Adonais* clearly comes out in favour of the rarefied, unconsummated passion of Dante for Beatrice, and Dante's later conspicuous absence from 'The Triumph of Life' appears to validate this.

From this point – or more strictly, from the definitive irony of *Epipsychidion* – Shelley's former efforts to theorise a fully-fledged sexuality not only harmless but actually conducive to spirituality, are virtually abandoned. In the revived Gothic horrors of 'The Triumph of Life', the 'unintellectual sensuality' of Rousseau and the trampled celebrants is one of the greatest factors in the spiritual degeneration of the human race, whereas Jesus – the exemplar of chastity – is unequivocally redeemed. 'The act itself' may be 'nothing' as long as the 'instinctive sense' can be sublimated almost to 'annihilation,'<sup>504</sup> but Shelley's 'deep distrust of (his own) masculine sexuality'<sup>505</sup> precludes this tenuous hope, reducing it to an easily-abused rhetorical technique for

<sup>500</sup> *Shelley's Major Poetry*, pp. 248-9:

The star here alluded to is the planet Venus, [...] (Hesperus or Vesper). [...] One of the symbolic statements made about Emilia, the Urania of *Epipsychidion*, is that she is "a Splendour" who has descended to earth, "leaving the third sphere pilotless." The conception [...] is Dantean, since the third sphere is that of the planet Venus. Because it is also in Dante's cosmology, the sphere of Rhetoric, it is a fitting location for the souls of great poets, who in *Adonais* are called "the splendours of the firmament of time." If Shelley has in mind any specific location for the region to which Adonais has risen, it is the third heaven of Dante's *Paradiso*.

<sup>501</sup> *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 82.

<sup>502</sup> *Adonais*, 236-8: 'Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men/ Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart/ Dare the unpastured dragon in his den?'

<sup>503</sup> Notes to *Queen Mab*. V. 189, p. 372.

<sup>504</sup> *Platonism of Shelley*, p. 410.

<sup>505</sup> *Shelley's Mirrors of Love*, p. 54.

seducers as early as *St Irvyne*<sup>506</sup> and as late as *Epipsychidion*. Nevertheless, this is not a merely biological distinction, as the patriarchal anti-heroines of *Zofloya*, *Zastrozzi*, and even Beatrice of the Cenci (albeit as a result of sexual revulsion rather than desire) illustrate. Within the auspices of a society which Wollstonecraft, the ‘male Gothic’ writers, and even Plato perceived as founded upon the very dearth of empathy – epitomised in the perversion of sexual relationships to demonstrations of power – egotism is so pervasive that Shelley does not suppose gender alone to be any guarantee of damnation or redemption. The ‘Maidens and youths’ of ‘The Triumph of Life’ (149) are equally degraded in a final, catastrophic image of prevalent sexuality perfectly in accord with the Gothic dystopias of Lewis, Dacre, and Maturin. Considering the strenuous efforts of *Queen Mab*, *Laon and Cythna*, *Rosalind and Helen*, and the ‘Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks’ to expound a ‘redeemed,’ spiritualised, and sublimated form of ‘free love,’ it is a singular irony that Shelley’s most confident statement of transcendence from the Platonic ‘shadow of our night [...] [a]nd that unrest which men miscall delight’ (*Adonais*, 352-4) would ultimately have to involve the wholesale extirpation of sexuality.

Considering Shelley himself, we may interpret the development of his poetics of sexuality – from the sordid cynicism of the early Gothic works; to the ardent free love expostulations of *Queen Mab*; the much more sedate and qualified celebration of sex in the ‘Discourse on the manners of the Antient Greeks’; and finally back to the infernal depths in ‘The Triumph of Life’ – as in some ways a direct reflection of his personal development, or recognised lack of it. However the protagonist of ‘Alastor’ may or may not reflect his creator’s psyche, there can be little doubt that the grand, aspiring failure of the *Epipsychidion* poet provides a mocking commentary on the demise of Shelley’s own utopian free love experiment of 1814 and beyond: the elopement with Mary Godwin. Since the results of this, by 1820, included the death by suicide of Harriet Shelley, Shelley’s failed attempt to secure custody of his children by her, and the increasing emotional estrangement between

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<sup>506</sup> I refer to the efforts of Ginotti/ Nempere to seduce Eloise in *St. Irvyne*. *ZSI*, p. 177: ‘[...] do you not think it an insult to two souls, united to each other in the irrefragable covenants of love and congeniality, to promise, in the sight of a Being whom they know not, that fidelity which is certain otherwise?’

his supposed Platonic soul-mate and himself, Shelley had ample reason to enquire into the failure of his project. *Epipsychidion* remains somewhat open-ended on the matter of whether or not its protagonist is of the self-deceiving Saint-Preux persuasion, entirely responsible through his own dishonest protestations of high-mindedness for the degeneration that overwhelms him, but provides a stark repositioning of Shelley's sexual ethics from the qualified optimism of the 'Discourse': embracing a harsher Platonism in *Epipsychidion*, Shelley effectively rules out the possibility that human passions can ever have a place within the truly ideal and spiritual. The punishment of Rousseau in 'The Triumph of Life' dramatically confirms this position, as both Shelley and Wollstonecraft considered Rousseau as a writer very much under the sway of his natural passions. If the figure of Dante – famously content to love, and not to possess, his ideal – was thus to be established as a more proper model for Shelley to emulate in future years, it is possible another phasing-out of the Gothic would have occurred in his work, though by no means certain: its very persistence up until the end of his career is testimony to the determination of the repressed to keep on returning, in flat defiance of all intellectual and philosophical endeavour.

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Looking back along the course of Shelley's career, we might conclude that the 'idealised pessimism' of Adonais is less a development from the millennial vision of *Prometheus Unbound* or the optimistic statements of 'The Discourse On the Manners of the Antient Greeks...' as it is an essential reaffirmation of views held since his earliest works. The stark dualism established in *Zastrozzi* between the aborted, spiritually-depicted relationship of Verezzi and Julia, and the sensual, enervating 'bowre of bliss' Verezzi eventually succumbs to with Matilda, was a structure Shelley consciously chose not to reassert in the post-Enlightenment context of *Queen Mab* (contemporary with his assurance to Godwin that his Gothic days were over), but which rears its head from 'Alastor' to 'The Triumph of Life' with great frequency and emphasis. It carries with it a weight of associations, not least among them the distrust of sexuality which compromises even

sincere efforts to depict idealised consummation (as in *Laon and Cythna*), and into which Shelley's Platonism flows, validating some of the suspicions of the genre (particularly in regard to heterosexual sensuality) whilst leading him to dismiss the Gothic's reactionary notions of innate degeneracy in homosexuality and incest as 'crimes of convention.' Shelley remains consistent with regard to his attitude to the medieval values embodied in the genre, and at no point does his work evince any nostalgia for the Gothic as a period or as a system.<sup>507</sup> On the contrary, Shelley frequently draws attention to the arbitrary brutality and psychologically destructive nature of social and ethical systems founded upon medieval ideals (i.e. aristocracy, patriarchy, and institutionalised religion), his most clear and sustained attack being *The Cenci*, in which Renaissance Italy, held up to a close moral scrutiny, fails dismally. Although *Zastrozzi* lacks the political and social depth of later works, Shelley's attack on the institutions of patriarchy begins at this stage, and his depiction of the (from his point of view) very contemporary vice of libertinism (a major anxiety of his) as a corrupt outgrowth of the values of the decadent, anarchic world of the Gothic, affords a clear stab at the lingering medieval standards of his own time. For much the same reason, and in spite of his admiration for *Julie* (which affords a similar rejection of the Gothic, as embodied in the violently egotistic effusions of Saint-Preux), Shelley finds himself obliged to reject Rousseau's system, which – whatever it may aim to reform – merely wishes to uphold the institution of patriarchy, and to side with Wollstonecraft. In her work, Shelley would find many of his points of view on the Gothic and society to be reinforced: his early attack on libertinism, his distrust of marriage (ill-conceived and sadistic marriages being a staple of the Gothic), and his general hatred of patriarchy.

Wollstonecraft's depiction of women forced into a position of both physical and spiritual dependency on men is graphically realised in *The Cenci*, and linked with a pervasive system essentially designed to rob individuals of their right to arrive at independent moral choices, or to

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<sup>507</sup> In contrast, for example, to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Ironically, bearing in mind Shelley's apparent belief that William Godwin would not wish to associate with a Gothic author, Godwin's *Caleb Williams* demonstrates a 'revolutionary Gothic' in direct assault upon Burke's reactionary medievalism long before Shelley took up the standard.



pursue spirituality except along a rigidly-institutionalised path. The Gothic mode affords a grotesque but effective means of exposing the sadistic reality of this ‘ethical’ system, and – insofar as it preserved aspects of the medieval – that of Shelley’s own time. Keenly aware of the repressive backlash that followed in the wake of the French Revolution, fed directly into the reactionary Gothic works of Lewis, Radcliffe, and Burke, and re-asserted nostalgia for medieval values – a disastrous regression from Enlightenment values, as seen by radicals such as Godwin and Wollstonecraft – Shelley directly aligns himself with the cause of the earlier generation of radicals (e.g. In the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* and *On Christianity*). His works consistently define medieval ‘morality’ as a mixture of superstition, arbitrary prejudice, ‘rationalised’ sadism, the dearth of empathy, and – by no means least – complete and unbending ‘ideals’ of patriarchal privilege, which he judged as being no more in advance than the contemporary popular view of women in Islamic societies (i.e. As being soulless sex-slaves, which both Shelley and Wollstonecraft imply is the definition which reactionary commentators – such as Rousseau and even Milton<sup>508</sup> – would wish to apply).

Thus, in spite of the apparently despairing statements of ‘The Triumph of Life’, *Epipsyichion*, and *Adonais* with regard to the seemingly insuperable difficulty of redeeming sexuality in such a degenerate context, Shelley’s use of Gothic tropes is so firmly linked to contemporary social trends, and so clearly defined alongside supportive views (from Plato to Wollstonecraft) and against alternative, reactionary views – also strongly represented in the Gothic, which (in the hands of Lewis and Burke, for example) thus becomes an expression of fear of declining moral values and Continental influences – that it becomes a detailed diagnosis of social and ethical ills rather than an unqualified cry of despair. Furthermore, it consistently presents, although generally with little enough success in the context of the works (which is now a standard trope of dystopian fiction), methods of redemption and reform, such as the detailed scrutiny of ethical standards and the rejection of arbitrary ones, unconditional empathy as a ‘cultural super-ego’

<sup>508</sup> Cf. *Right of Woman*, p. 88.

(to rule out revenge, hatred, and displaced self-contempt in the application of ethical standards), and the abolition of patriarchal privilege and the conventional 'masculine' and 'feminine' standards enshrined by it (which, aside from being conducive to social justice, would also be spiritually advisable, as it would entail the invalidation of principles such as inherent power, sensuality, and the moral dependency of women upon men). Ultimate spiritual redemption is a fraught (and unresolved) issue, though Shelley is quite clear that unless preceded by profound changes in worldly ethical systems, it will remain definitively closed to all but the super-human few (or two, if we limit it to Christ and Socrates). In conclusion, whilst Shelley, throughout his career, rejects the ideological values of the Gothic, generically he clings to it with a passion.

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